

Fig. I.1: Adriënne Solser's portrait on the cover of *Kunst en Amusement*, 15 December 1922.

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Adriënne Solser on the Dutch Popular Stage

THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1885-1904

During the first two decades of Adriënne Solser's career, from the 1880s through 1904, popular stage entertainment became professional and turned into a booming business in the Netherlands, as in most developed countries. The boom was enhanced by the advent of *variété*, revue, cabaret, and cinema. Solser's career parallels this development in the sense that, in those years, she became a professional and respected soubrette in the Dutch *variété*. The oldest verses from her repertoire preserved at the EYE Filmmuseum date from 1904; if this was indeed the year when she began to collect and copy her repertoire—rather than that preceding notebooks were lost—, this is a sign that she was reaching professional maturity. Sources such as advertisements in local newspapers and the program leaflets of theaters where she used to perform testify to her increasing prominence by 1905, and as such, they provide more adequate means to reconstruct Solser's career than the extremely scarce remarks in newspaper reports and the virtually absent reviews in other periodicals, even up to 1912. Additional illuminating source material is contextual and relates to two of her brothers, who were major players in the business; to some of her female colleagues; and, finally, to issues pertaining to the entertainment business in general. In this weaving of a contextual fabric around the few available facts and figures, the contours and conditions of Adriënne Solser's early professional years will be reconstructed.

Around 1900, Dutch *variété* did not differ significantly from the French *music-hall*, American vaudeville, or the German *Spezialitäten-Programm*. These various terms designated the kind of entertainment that targeted an audience that consisted of a mix of classes, sexes, and ages. These performances were presented in posh halls built or rebuilt especially for the purpose of staging

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series of awe-inspiring and entertaining performances. Such an evening, or matinee, program was composed of a number of distinct short acts, usually including a trained-animal routine, acrobatics, a clown act, as well as comic, musical, and vocal performances. Throughout the industrializing world, such miscellaneous programs were instrumental to introducing film to mass audiences, and thus it was that Dutch *variété* programs began featuring a standard film act in 1896.[1] The films shown during this period were of foreign origin, like the bulk of the *specialiteiten*, the Dutch term for the individual acts or attractions. The owner of one Amsterdam *variété*-theater ventured into filmmaking by 1899, but this was exceptionally early.[2] *Variété* programs in the Netherlands used to feature German, English, French, and American acts, while Dutch comic actors and actresses travelled to Berlin, Brussels, London, Paris, New York, and to "Nederlandsch Indië", the colonial term for what is now Indonesia. Adriënne Solser reportedly performed in Belgium towards the end of the 1890s, and her repertory notebooks contain French translations and German versions of several verses.[3]

The regular staging of untranslated French and German plays and operettas before and around the turn of the century, as advertised in newspapers, suggests that theater audiences were presumed to understand the two languages that surround the small country of the Netherlands. This assumption, together with the international orientation of Dutch *variété*, initially generated some reservations towards Dutch comedians, who, by the turn of the century, had nonetheless managed to secure the goodwill of directors and audiences because the latter better understood the subtleties in humorous texts in their own language.[4] If Dutch performers and their texts were to satisfy an increasingly fastidious audience, they would have to meet the standards upheld by the international attractions. This goal had been achieved convincingly by the early 1910s, a time when audiences downright demanded to see and hear Dutch artists perform.[5]

Pioneering Comedians in the Dutch *Variété*

The first generation of male and female comedians in the Netherlands, including Adriënne Solser, became popular during the 1880s and 1890s.[6] Advertisements in newspapers reveal, furthermore, that both female and male Dutch comedians became an indispensable element in the *variété* program after the turn of the century. The size of the font used to advertise them illustrates that they had become the popular stage's biggest attractions by 1910. The best of Dutch comedians, though—including, during the 1900s, Chrétienni and Louisette, Louis and Rika Davids, Louise Fleuron and the duo Solser en Hesse, with

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Adriënne's brother Lion—were crowd-pleasers from the beginning. Adriënne Solser herself attained such a status by 1908.

Aside from Adriënne and Lion, another sister, Josephine, and two more brothers, Michel and Louis, were active on the *variété* stage before the turn of the century.[7] With Adriënne, Louis, and Lion carrying on after 1900, the Solser family was one of several groups of relatives and their spouses who, together, largely constituted the acting stock of Dutch popular theater and *variété*. The largest and most renowned families were the Davids' and the De la Mars.

The former family included, the *variété*, cabaret, and revue artist Louis Davids, who initially performed with his sister Rika until he formed a comical duo with a second sister, Henriëtte (who went by the stagename Heintje) in



Fig. I.2: Adriënne Solser in the early 1900s. Publicity portrait by C. Bethlehem, Den Helder

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1912. Heintje married the entertainment critic Philip Pinkhof, who, under the *nom de plume* Rido, wrote many successful revues, in some of which Adriënne Solser performed as well. Heintje Davids went on to become one of the top revue stars in the Netherlands after the First World War and also acted in films. The central figure of the latter family, the De La Mars, was the actor, comedian, and stage director Napoleon de la Mar, known as Nap in the vernacular, one of the five children of the actor Charles de la Mar and the actress Rika Kley. During the 1910s, Adriënne Solser appeared in revues and cabaret programs with Nap and Chris de la Mar. A further influential family in the fields of the legitimate and the popular stage, as well as in cinema, was the Bouwmeester clan, with, at its center, Louis Bouwmeester Sr. and his sister Theo, two of the most celebrated theater actors of their day.[8] And then there was the Van Dommelen family: the brothers Frits, Jan, and Louis, and their sister Caroline. Caroline (or Caro), was the most versatile of them: she alternated between the legitimate stage, cabaret, revue, and film, and also directed films.

While many of these actors continued to collaborate with their relatives throughout their careers, the Solsers, apart from occasionally standing in for each other, did so only at the very beginning. In fact, they began performing within their parents' company, which toured the province of Zuid-Holland during the 1870s and 1880s.[9] Michel, the third child born in 1865, allegedly made his acting debut at age five or six;[10] and Adriënne, born in 1873, was reported to have sung on stage at age ten.[11] Together with Josephine (1863-1928), about whom not much more is known than that she performed as a soubrette with Michel, their brother Louis (1868-1944), and their mother, the actress Engelina Hartlooper (1835-1920), they were the artistes of the troupe managed by the father, Johannes Solser (1833-1893), "who went by the name of Van der Vank".[12] The youngest of the children, Lion (1877-1915), was sent to theater school and began his career in an operetta at age sixteen. The Solser or Van der Vank troupe originally concentrated on "koeplet-zingen", that is to say, singing mischievous verses and telling jokes, with which they toured towns and villages and performed at the fairgrounds or on Sunday evenings.[13] The Dutch entertainment historian Jacques Klöters has described the hardships of the itinerant actors, who generally lacked education and accordingly had a low social status; who had to meet the audience demand of offering as much variety as possible, ceaselessly creating and rehearsing new acts and gags; and for whom traveling over unpaved roads, often with several performances in different towns in a single day, must have been very tiresome. Their low social status was complemented by their free way of life, Klöters adds, by unlawful marriages with children being born out of wedlock as a rule.[14] The Solser parents did indeed follow this custom: father Johannes acknowledged five children in 1876, three years after Adriënne, at that moment the youngest,

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Fig. I.3: Michel Solser. Publicity portrait by S. van der Zijl, Amsterdam.



had been born.[15] By comparison, Adriënne's love life was not as whimsical as Klöters believes it to have been[16]—even though none of her three marriages were everlasting, her children were legitimate. Whether Adriënne Solser enjoyed any further education than what she learned from stage experience is not known, yet she had sufficient command of German and French to deliver her verses and monologues abroad.

The first of the family to be discovered for the emerging *variété* circuit was Michel Solser. In 1886, the *variété*-theater owner Carl Pfläging launched him at the contemporary temples of entertainment, the Doon in Rotterdam and the Paleis voor de Volksvlijt in Amsterdam, after which the program-manager Wittkower Gerson contracted him in 1887 to the Amsterdam *café-concert* Victoria (known as the "Vic" in the vernacular).[17] It was there that Michel Solser earned his legendary reputation as the most brilliant comedian in the country.[18]

As those were the transitional years of *variété* in the Netherlands, before the opening of the posh *variété*-theaters, it was to the surprise of *tout* Amsterdam

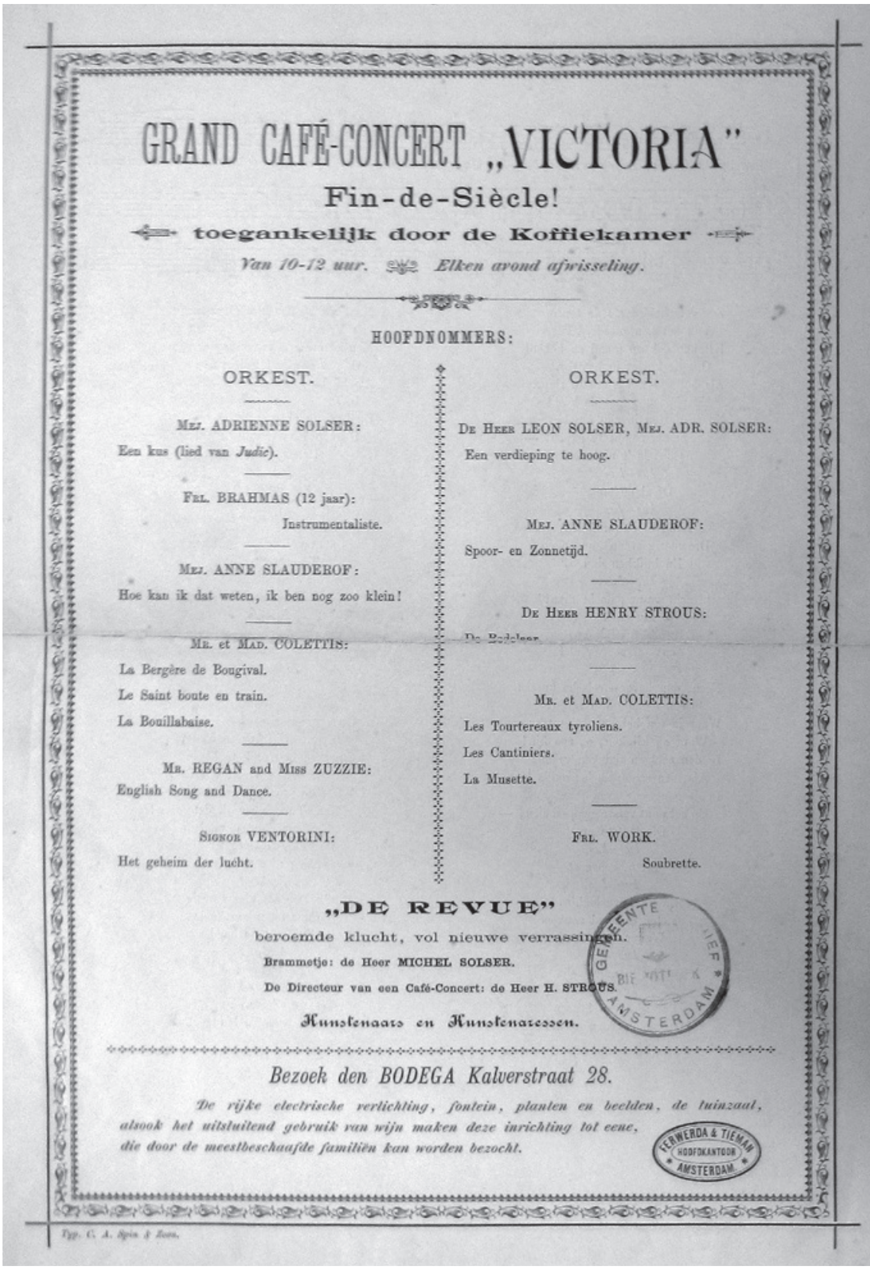
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that a previously nondescript place like the Vic, located in a grubby neighborhood and surrounded by infamous bars and *café-concerts*, managed to attract large numbers of the so-called better public, who would come at midnight to attend a show built around a sketch with the title "De revue" (The revue).[19] The fact that the Vic continued to thrive on Michel Solser's glory for a time—after Michel Solser and his company left the Vic in 1892 and he died of tuberculosis the following year—is indicative of his impact both on the Vic and the scene in Amsterdam. The Vic, however, lost its prominence before the turn of the century[20] and its building was demolished in 1911, when playwright Herman Heyermans, under his *nom de plume* Samuel Falkland, paid tribute to Michel Solser with an utterly graphic depiction:

> Solser was the soul of the Vic. Solser died. Solser, the giant, the titanic, who endeavored from within the *variété* to demonstrate to the entirety of stage actors of our self-satisfied country *how to act with ingenuity*, how to use the most beautiful parts of the human body: *the face*, the facial muscles, the eyes, the mouth—Solser, the most excellent caricaturist, psychologist, performer, acrobat, as well as comic and tragic actor of the century—Solser, who carried on his bony shoulders a globe of a hundred worlds filled with grotesque creatures and wretches in agony, who climbed the veneered steps of the painted backdrop and carried in his flimsy coffer farces, dramas and tragedies—Solser, who spoke all languages, Mephistopheles and Faust in one, a fine artist and a critic.[21]

None of the existing accounts of Michel Solser's career mentions whether his sisters and brothers were contracted together with him or if he just brought them along, so the precise moment of Adriënne's debut in Amsterdam remains uncertain. The date is equally irretrievable from advertisements in newspapers, because the Vic did not name the supporting artistes, and dates are often missing from the program leaflets preserved, as is the case with a rare surviving leaflet featuring Adriënne Solser.[22] In December 1887, the advertisements began singling out Michel's and Josephine's names, and in October 1888, a series of little sketches was announced featuring Michel Solser "and family".[23] Later advertisements for the sketch "De Revue" only featured Michel Solser.[24] It seems that the sketch was delivered more than a thousand times with, apart from its main attraction, a variable cast, in which Adriënne may have appeared.[25] The surviving program leaflet, in which Adriënne Solser is featured as delivering an Anna Judic song and in a duo act together with Lion Solser in the *specialiteitenprogramma* which preceded "De revue", only unspecified "Kunstenaars en Kunstenaressen", (male and female artistes) in the supporting cast for the sketch.

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GRAND CAFÉ-CONCERT „VICTORIA"

Fin-de-Siècle!

toegankelijk door de Koffiekamer

Van 10-12 uur. *Elken avond afwisseling.*

HOOFDNOMMERS:

ORKEST.

MEJ. ADRIENNE SOLSER:
Een kus (lied van *Judic*).

FRL. BRAHMAS (12 jaar):
Instrumentaliste.

MEJ. ANNE SLAUDEROF:
Hoe kan ik dat weten, ik ben nog zoo klein!

MR. et MAD. COLETTIS:
La Bergère de Bougival.
Le Saint boute en train.
La Bouillabaise.

MR. REGAN and MISS ZUZZIE:
English Song and Dance.

SIGNOR VENTORINI:
Het geheim der lucht.

ORKEST.

DE HEER LEON SOLSER, MEJ. ADR. SOLSER:
Een verdieping te hoog.

MEJ. ANNE SLAUDEROF:
Spoor- en Zonnetijd.

DE HEER HENRY STROUS:
De Bedelaar.

MR. et MAD. COLETTIS:
Les Tourtereaux tyroliens.
Les Cantiniers.
La Musette.

FRL. WORK.
Soubrette.

„DE REVUE"

beroemde klucht, vol nieuwe verrassingen.

Brammetje: de Heer MICHEL SOLSER.

De Directeur van een Café-Concert: de Heer H. STROUS.

Kunstenaars en Kunstenaressen.

Bezoek den BODEGA Kalverstraat 28.

De rijke electrische verlichting, fontein, planten en beelden, de tuinzaal, alsook het uitsluitend gebruik van wijn maken deze inrichting tot eene, die door de meestbeschaafde familiën kan worden bezocht.

FERWERDA & TIEMAN HOOFDKANTOOR AMSTERDAM

Typ. C. A. Spin & Zoon.

Fig. I.4: Earliest traceable performance of Adriënne Solser. Undated program leaflet from the café-concert Victoria.

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If Adriënne Solser did not fiddle with the dates when she celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of her stage career in April 1919, then her debut at the Vic ought to be dated to 1889, as was suggested in the advertisement with the program announcement "Wat Adriënne Solser zong in 1889"[26] (what Adriënne Solser sang in 1889). Only five years after this jubilee, however, she was already announcing her fortieth anniversary on stage.[27] With a little leniency, this can be taken as a retrospective upgrading of her years with the parental troupe, that is to say, if the anniversary was not merely held for publicity's sake. At any rate, the date of her Amsterdam debut is rather obscured by such jubilee announcements, although she did perform more than once at the Vic.[28]

Like her female colleagues and contemporaries Louise Fleuron and Emilie Culp, Adriënne Solser usually performed solo,[29] while other soubrettes preferred to work in duos, such as Louisette with her "teacher" Chrétienni and Rika Davids with her brother Louis. Men also worked in duos, like Lion Solser with Piet Hesse, to cite but one of many instances. At bookings aside from the Vic, Josephine Solser regularly appeared together with Michel,[30] who did so with his friend Chrétienni as well. One characteristic of Michel Solser was his insistence on working as an itinerant comedian, for it allowed him to earn more money to support the family—his wife, his siblings and parents.[31] It remains unclear whether he or someone else served as a model for Adriënne in this regard, but she obviously upheld a similar principle. This even goes for the part of her career prior to the turn of the century, when she, as well as her brothers, was an occasional performer at the Frascati-Schouwburg in Amsterdam, which mainly staged operettas and boulevard comedies. Adriënne Solser's involvement in some of those productions can be positively established from Frascati's program leaflets, which reveal, by the same token, that she was definitely not a stock member of the playhouse.[32] In Adriënne Solser's offstage life during the 1890s there occurred several events that may have made her reluctant to enter into regular engagements. Within one decade, she went to live abroad, married twice, and gave birth to three or possibly four children, in May 1893, January 1896, July 1897, and August 1898, respectively.[33] The middle two were born in Pretoria, South Africa, where Solser lived for about three years with her then-husband, the doctor and pharmacist Louis-Joseph Boesnach; and if there was indeed a fourth child, it may have been born during her stage tour through Belgium.[34] The appearances of Adriënne Solser at the Frascati-Schouwburg, in January 1895 and April 1900, then, do seem to demarcate the beginning and the end of her stay(s) abroad.

Adriënne Solser was a soubrette, which is a profession that has evolved considerably throughout its history and taken on more than one name accordingly. In a 1902 reference to a solo performance, Solser was advertised and reviewed as "Miss Adriënne Solser, the international *chanteuse* who enthralls

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with impish songs and much, much more".[35] Alex de Haas, a historian with first-hand experience,[36] has explained that the term *chanteuse* belonged to the *café-concert*, a precursor of the professional and respectable *variété*, that is to say, to a place like the Vic. Earlier, such *tingeltangels* (honky-tonks), had been frequented by male revelers and bar-flies seeking voyeuristic and drinking pleasures, and if women accompanied them, they were usually prostitutes or at least considered to be such. Performances staged at such cafés were first and foremost meant to boost consumption:

> As soon as the pianist had played the opening march and overture, they came parading onto the stage like a flock of geese while singing the ceremonial entry song, and subsequently settled themselves, sprawling but with grace, on the beautiful plush chairs which were placed in a semicircle on the stage. Thus they formed the conventional *corbeille*, a flower-basket arrangement, which stayed on throughout the show as a living backdrop, firstly to enliven the setting, secondly to have at hand an encouraging chorus for every refrain, and thirdly (and this was their main function!) to entice the posh revelers in the audience to treat the ladies to rounds of drinks and thereby increase the consumption returns.[37]

The women's stage act was called "Bühne-zitten", (stage sitting) and Solser's anniversary program of 1919 suggested that she too had participated in this rather humiliating act.[38] The *chanteuses* among the women, then, used to take turns in singing verses, a routine which demanded more of their miming than of their vocal or acting abilities:

> The *chanteuses*, soubrettes, and sentimental singers, who during the *variété* years still counted as top of the bill, launched "risqué" frivolities with impish and seductive little signs and a gentle abundance of promising winks.[39]

Thus, the clichéd image of the female entertainer in the time before *variété* supposed that she would achieve a "*succès de femme*"[40] (success as a woman) instead of being noticed for her presentation or performance. Nevertheless, both Klöters and Haas have emphasized that—although the Vic was by no means a classy *variété*-theater—the Vic had shifted from a honky-tonk to a relatively decent place where female performers were not expected to act as dance-hall hostesses. The program leaflet of the Vic does indeed give the impression of a *café-concert* program, with songs and sketches meant to be watched and listened to.

The preserved program leaflet contains not only the program but also the

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translated text and the music of the Anna Judic song which Solser delivered in the Vic: "Een Kus" (A Kiss).[41] The song text reviews various kinds of kisses: lover's stolen kisses, children's innocent kissing, the mechanical kissing of married couples, and a soubrette's blown kisses. There is no refrain, but an alternating rhythm of full sentences and shorter lines, and in the middle of the latter the direction "kus-kus" (kiss, kiss) is repeatedly printed in italics, as if to suggest that this was to be enacted rather than sung or said. At the end, it reads a few times: "kushand" (blown kiss).

In the review of Solser's performance from which I quoted earlier, the addendum "and much, much more" still evoked the old atmosphere, as did the title "Miss", redolent of availability, while in fact Solser was in the midst of her second marriage.[42] Thus the writer discerned impishness in Solser's performance and his review is the only one I have encountered that did so. The site of the performance was the impermanent "Grand Spectacle Concert Varié" pitched at the Rotterdam fair,[43] but just like the Vic, a 1902 fair constituted a transitional stage between the old risqué setting and a more decent contemporary decor. The fact that the reporter on this occasion noticed and appreciated Adriënne Solser's verses may indicate that the emancipation of the *chanteuse*, that is to say, her transformation into the soubrette, had taken place. Not only the womanly presence mattered now, but the text and the acting as well.

All the same, the soubrette as a phenomenon never entirely rid herself of her dubious reputation: for example, the columnist who defended and advocated for the *variété*'s eagerness for respectability, even in 1917 still considered it indispensable to contrast the soubrette's image with her off-stage life. The article stated that the soubrette, for the sake of her job, "drinks and [...] talks about immoral things and [...] enjoys dirty jokes; she has friends and vices: in short, she embodies Vileness".[44] As soon as she is through with the performance, however, she goes home to take care of her bedridden husband and little child, whom she supports with her wages. Arguing in a similar manner, Alex de Haas has insisted on the gap between the soubrette's off- and on-stage lives, while he further pointed out that "even the texts of the songs they delivered were actually of an almost virginal virtuousness, and they preferred songs with a wholesome moral ending".[45]

Klöters, on the other hand, does not disentangle the image and the reality of female performers in the *variété*.[46] In the case of Adriënne Solser, he has confused this reputation with her life by stating: "both her comical talent and her career were as erratic as her love life".[47] Whatever one may think of her love life, it does not correlate with her professional career, which was stable and consistent throughout. The contemporary public's insistence on the decency of female comedians, whether sanctimonious or not, also parallels the discourse on the new standards of decency to which the *variété* was confining

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itself in those years. In this sense, one could say that women performers were instrumental and exemplary in the attempt to heighten popular entertainment. The shift from *chanteuse* to soubrette entailed that women invent a new craft for themselves and that they make use of a range of skills and talents aside from coquettishness. In this light, the legacy of philandering ascribed to soubrettes largely appears to be a product of the enduring historical imaginations of men. One should likewise take with a grain of salt Klöter's suggestion that it was preferred to apply the term soubrette to "gay, coquettish, *young* women's parts" and that, with the pioneering soubrettes' aging, their names faded in favor of their younger colleagues.[48] The careers of Louise Fleuron, Louisette,[49] and Adriënne Solser, among others, do not validate such age norms for women. Although they indeed began performing when young, they remained active as soubrettes for as long as Dutch *variété* remained popular.

The word "soubrette" originates from the French, but it was not used in French *music-hall*.[50] The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines it as a comic female character that became popular in the comic opera and the operetta of the eighteenth century. "Most often of an independent nature, the soubrette demonstrated a nonconformist attitude coupled with a down-to-earth approach and native humour."[51] The Dutch dictionary *Van Dale* specifies it as a light soprano part (usually a chambermaid's role) in a comic opera or as a lead in an operetta,[52] yet does not refer to the specific use of the term in the Dutch *variété*, in which, interestingly enough, the soubrette's main characteristics, lyrical bent, folk humor, and independence, were perpetuated.

Within the Dutch *variété*, with its family-based audience and attention to what happened on stage, a soubrette's performance formed an act in its own right. In both its prominence within the program structure and its attractiveness to the public, it was equivalent to the act of her male counterpart, the *karakterkomiek* or *salonkomiek* (the character or gentleman comedian). Female and male comedians used to deliver comic monologues, little sketches, gags, and *quodlibets*, or *coupletten* (verses); such acts highlighted the artist's comic and vocal delivery and acting abilities, although, with the advent of cabaret after the turn of the century, the subtlety and poignancy of the verses gradually began to draw more critical attention. As a warning to those who never witnessed such performances and to historians who try to comprehend them through the texts alone, Alex de Haas has pointed out the ephemeral condition of the comedian's act:

> those soubrettes, *chanteuses*, character comedians, duos, and the like, were excellent stage actors who "delivered" their verses and for whom the texts merely functioned as directions as in the *commedia dell'arte*, ergo, merely as bases to build their ingenious creations upon.[53]

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Haas was more specific concerning female performers and their qualities in his necrology of Adriënne Solser's contemporary and colleague Louise Fleuron, who

> embodied all that the genre required: a figure built to launch the regal ladies' fashions between 1900 and 1915, a beautiful and striking face, a pair of expressive eyes, a highly evocative facial expression, and a warm voice, voluminous enough to fill the largest halls.[54]

In addition, he praised Fleuron's comic versatility, her capability "to make much of small nothings" and her sense "for what would work well".[55] Skills such as these were a necessity, and because the acts were normally short, the actor also needed to capture her or his audience and carry it away from the very first minute:



Fig. I.5: Louise Fleuron. Publicity portrait by W. Ganter, Rotterdam.

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> True female *humorists*, imitators of life, satirical singers, are rare. That kind of art needs a certain quick and buoyant jollity, a casual delivery of cheerful satire, which excludes all subjectivity. [...] The cabaret and *variété* actress is [...] alone and first needs to establish contact, become the centre of attention, take us into a sphere of flippant jokes and jests, which is her one and only "aim." In her genre, she has to be an "instigator" whose performance is decisive from the start.[56]

The ability to mould the audience to her or his will and the enduring efficacy of the performance were what made a performer into a "born artiste", an epithet also bestowed upon Adriënne Solser:

> For one thing is certain: Mrs. Solser knows the audience [...] inside out. She knows very well how to capture the attention in a full house, and to hold it right until the last adventure of the humorous duo from the Jordaan. Only born artistes can do this.[57]

Among male comedians, two "genres" could be distinguished around the turn of the century. The character comedians, like Michel and Lion Solser, made use of a type recognizable from his farcical garb and attributes and whose point of view allowed them to magnify his naiveté and render it comical. They were followed by—and, in retrospect, contrasted with—the gentleman comedians, like Chrétienni and the later Louis Davids, who appeared in stylish frocks and accompanied their verses with elegant gestures and dance steps; thus, resembled modern cabaret artists. Klöters does not distinguish between the different genres for soubrettes, or supposes that they adapted themselves to the style of the gentleman comedian.[58] If, however, we compare with each other the five leading soubrettes at the turn of the century, Emilie Culp,[59] Anna Slauderof, Louise Fleuron, Louisette, and Adriënne Solser, the first distinction to be made is that in their performances either the vocal or the acting was emphasized. The *gezangs-soubrette* Culp[60] and the *operette-soubrette* Slauderof were vocalists with acting talent, while the others were entertaining actresses with good voices. Fleuron and Louisette were soubrettes compatible with the type of the gentleman comedian, while Solser also ventured into farce and character comedy. She indeed did so in 1900, albeit not as a soubrette but in a comic operetta about an Amsterdam phenomenon called *Hartjesdag*, the evening and night before the annual fair in mid-August when, from time immemorial, everybody, including women and children, used to get drunk and stagger along the streets, particularly in the working-class neighborhood of the Jordaan.[61] Adriënne Solser played one of those women, named Kee, Trui, or Ka, as was typical for the neighborhood, and in a review, the actors

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earned compliments for the liveliness of the impersonations.[62] As will become apparent, this typical female figure from Amsterdam will dutifully accompany Adriënne Solser throughout her stage and cinema career.

THE YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT, 1904-1914

Before the war, Rotterdam was the centre of popular entertainment in the Netherlands.[63] The acts and plays of Dutch comedians often premiered in the harbor city before reaching the country's capital, Amsterdam. Adriënne Solser's "latest creation", for instance, was advertised for its run at the Grand Théâtre in Amsterdam in 1912 as being the "big success at the Casino Variété in Rotterdam".[64] The names of the *specialiteitentheaters* were frequently bracketed together with the name of the program-manager in charge, who received credit for making sophisticated and exquisite choices in programming.[65] Between 1904 and 1914, Adriënne Solser made appearances on several of these stages, most notably in the Casino Soesman and Circus Pfläging in Rotterdam, the Scala in The Hague, and the Grand Théâtre Van Lier and the Panopticum in Amsterdam. This alone already places her at the top of the *variété* artistes during those years. However, while bookings at the big *variété*-theaters were necessary for earning and sustaining fame and popularity, they were not sufficiently remunerative to sustain performers. Alex de Haas has pointed out that comedians, in order to support themselves and their families, used to tour the fairs, the exhibitions, and the annual local festivities in the provinces.[66]

According most likely to Barbarossa, the pseudonym for H. C. Schröder, the editor-in-chief and entertainment critic of the daily *De Telegraaf*, this practice was pioneered by the Ensemble Solser en Hesse,[67] the company that Lion Solser had established in 1897 with Piet Hesse and their wives, the soubrettes Adriënne Solser-Willemsens and Anna Hesse-Slauderof.[68] Adriënne Solser must have been one of the many that had followed in their footsteps by 1915. Nevertheless, her career chronology shows a remarkable frequency of returns to the Casino Soesman between 1904 and 1909, the year in which she was on the bill twice within a period of three months.[69] Contemporary advertisements in newspapers also confirm Haas' observation that prolongations were extremely rare.[70] A standard booking lasted two weeks, after which even the most popular comedian had to yield her or his place to a new attraction and wait half a year or longer before being booked again in the same theater or even the same city. This system obviously guaranteed the highly regarded diversity of the *variété* programs and brought about the ongoing circulation of the large contingent of performers.

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New Entertainment Genres and Blurry Boundaries

Within the programs in the first-class *variété*-theaters, new entertainment genres were introduced from the moment they emerged. This applies to cabaret, revue, one-act plays, *volksstukken* (folk plays), and cinema. Up until the war, Dutch *variété* took advantage of the new by incorporating the most attractive and the best of what staged entertainment had to offer; most of the *variété* artistes went along with the changing demand. Some of these artistes reshaped their repertoire and style in line with the new genres, as did Louis Davids and Louisette. Others joined in the *variété* and appeared with individual acts in revues, in cabaret programs, or, after 1912, in between film screenings, a practice put into effect by Louise Fleuron and Adriënne Solser, to name but a few. One of the effects was an increasing diversification within the profession of male and female comic actors. Typical of the 1910s, the various genres of entertainment existed alongside one another, their boundaries relatively blurry, and actresses and actors switched back and forth among them.

Dutch cabaret entered on the *variété* stage right after the turn of the century. Two models were followed: the German *Überbrettl* style, which embraced the incorporation of short sketches into an overall intimate program of songs and verses and which was performed on a stage; and the French *Chat noir* mode, which displayed textual and political sophistication in performances by individuals carried out amidst the audience. Representatives of the two schools—such as Oscar, Baron von Fielitz and Ernst Von Wolzogen and their troupes from Germany, and Yvette Guilbert and Aristide Bruant from France—were featured on Dutch stages by 1895,[71] but it took a few years before their followers in the Netherlands followed suit.

Among the cabaret's differences from the *variété,* the greatest emphasis was placed upon its intimate atmosphere and its proclivity for textual refinement and subtlety; thus it was called *intieme kunst* (intimate art) or *kleinkunst* (cabaret). Seminal adjectives used to indicate its qualities were "fijn" (delicate),[72] and "zuiver" (pure).[73] The most prominent among the early exponents of Dutch cabaret were Koos Speenhoff and Césarine Speenhoff-Prinz, who established their company "Het Kleine Tooneel" in 1909 after their separation from that other pivotal, but in this context rarely acknowledged, figure of Nap de la Mar and his company "Het Vrije Tooneel", which existed from 1907 until 1915 and rose again from 1918 to 1923. During the 1910s, they were joined by Jean Louis Pisuisse and his company "Intieme Kunst" and several others.[74]

The French model was adopted instead by individual Dutch comedians, most notably by men such as Eduard Jacobs.[75] According to the novelist, songwriter, and essayist Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwe, cabaret performers introduced restraint, candidness, eloquence, and social satire into the entertainers' deliv-

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ery and their songs; the texts, called "levensliederen" in Dutch language, spoke in the concise and true manner of life: "The cabaret song is the street song purified, the folk song shortened and empowered. The cabaret song is the street song, the folk song *turned into art*".[76] The delivery was entertaining, but also provoked thought.[77] Reyneke van Stuwe mentioned a few women, in addition to the majority of men, including Anna Klaassen and Antoinette Sohns, who, in the style of Yvette Guilbert, presented drames *condensés* in which they enacted what they were singing about. In her effort to clear the ground for a defense of cabaret as an art, Reyneke van Stuwe sharply contrasted cabaret to *variété*, suggesting that the latter was inferior and remained indecent. My research, however, supports a different conclusion. The decency and sophistication which she, and many historians in her wake, claimed to have been the rule in cabaret performances, already prevailed in Dutch *variété* during the 1910s, if only for the reason that the two genres over the course of the twenty years in question were part and parcel of one another: not only in the reception by the contemporary press, but also as presented on the stages and as practiced by the performers.

In an unsuccessful attempt to distinguish between cabaret and *variété*, the *variété* critic of *De Kunst* was led to assert in 1913, that there was simply a difference in excellence, not in essence.[78] Three years later, the *Theatergids* stated that cabaret was a mix of one-act plays, monologues, chansons, and some music.[79] The most noticeable and characteristic difference from a genuine *variété* program might have been the ever fewer number of acrobats, illusionists, trained animals, clowns, and conjurers, but by the mid-1910s, such acts were not only absent from cabaret programs but were likewise vanishing from the *variété* stage itself. In the latter, solo singers, dance, mime, and one act-plays, in other words, acts that required refined talents, were featured instead.[80]

Many advertisements reveal that, until the mid-1910s, *variété* acts were programmed in combination with *intiem toneel* in the Netherlands and that someone like Jacobs would also appear in revues.[81] The Speenhoffs, the De la Mars and the Jacobs represented major attractions for the renowned *variété*-theaters of Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

In order to further underpin my thesis that such mixed programming constituted a trend, I will elaborate on some programs that included Adriënne Solser. In 1909, she appeared as a *karakter soubrette* at Casino Variété Soesman on a bill with the most successful sketch performed by Het Vrije Tooneel, "Z'n Edelachtbare" (His Honor), featuring Nap de la Mar, his wife Sien de la Mar-Klopper, and Koos and Césarine Speenhoff, who, in addition, performed in other acts on the program. The program further included a German conjurer, "a comical female juggler and quick-change artiste" and "new pictures from the Casino Bioscope".[82] The satirical sketch "Z'n Edelachtbare" was written by Tony Schmitz, a writer of verses and comic sketches for the *variété*. It

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ridiculed the mayor of a town in the southern Catholic province of Brabant who presumably had interrupted a previous performance by Speenhoff and De la Mar on account of the indecent language used in it.[83] Another example dates from 1911, when Adriënne Solser as a "Hollandsche soubrette" had a slot in the *variété* program that traditionally accompanied the annual International Wrestling Match at the Casino Variété, between a one-act play "Loulou", a trained-dog routine, and a comic pantomime.[84] In 1914, we find Solser performing at the Panopticum Theater in Amsterdam in a program with songs by the "popular poet-singer Eduard Jacobs", a duet by The Niblets, in which the man sang the soprano and the woman the baritone part; a number with trained pigeons, a female dancer, and a sketch, "At Home", by Les Niards.[85]

One-act plays or sketches—short pieces that did not require a change of decor—were considered a feature of the much-discussed effort for respectability and for the improvement of that would be enhanced by the rise of cabaret. In a condensed historiography of the genre, Martin Liket, a playwright and critic of the *Theatergids*, traced the *variété's* international origins back to French *music-hall*, German cabaret, and American vaudeville, and pointed out that *variété* often concerned famous plays delivered in a condensed form.[86] The sketch "Loulou" seems to be an instance of this practice since it was probably adapted from the scandal-provoking plays "Erdgeist" (1895) and "Die Büchse der Pandora" (1904) by one of the founders of the Munich *Überbrettl,* Frank Wedekind.[87] In his article, Liket contended that this trend had been brought to the Netherlands by the sketches of Nap de la Mar and the duo Solser en Hesse. Apart from these performers, Liket ascertained in 1918 that "Holland has not yet been very productive in this dramatic genre",[88] but he added that Nap de la Mar was about to venture into it again. During the 1910s, De la Mar worked not only as an actor and comedian but also as a producer of sketches, operettas, and, as I shall emphasize further on, *volksstukken*. His involvement in these popular theater genres was part of De la Mar's on-going contribution to Dutch popular theater in the 1910s.[89]

A second sign that boundaries between genres were rather blurry before the war was that actresses and actors from the "serious" theater, cabaret, and *variété* did not stick to "their" own genres and stages but switched readily from one to another. In the context of a passionate plea for regarding *variété* performers as artists, *De Kunst* noticed this phenomenon as early as 1910.[90] This trend continued during the 1910s, as may be illustrated by the career of the actress, director, and novelist Caroline van Dommelen (1874-1957).

In addition to recurrent engagements with the Koninklijke Vereeniging het Nederlandsch Tooneel, the major theater company of the Netherlands with which Louis Bouwmeester and Theo Mann-Bouwmeester were also affiliated, and with other companies offering "high" theater such as those of Verkade and Heyermans, Caro van Dommelen appeared in cabaret programs

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Fig. I.6: Caroline van Dommelen. Undated publicity portrait by anonymous photographer.

with the Speenhoff couple[91] and Jean Louis Pisuisse. She likewise performed as a *conférencière*, that is to say, an entertainer who tied the various elements of a cabaret program together, in places like the Amsterdam *variété*-theater Panopticum.

At the outbreak of the war, popular theater stages had trouble in filling and sufficiently varying their programs, for they had traditionally been dependent upon a supply of foreign acts, performers, and films. The supply was blocked due to the mobilization abroad and the limitations placed upon international traffic; thus, several Dutch actors and especially actresses felt motivated to give the lighter theater genres a try. Another reason for Van Dommelen to seek an expansion of her possibilities may have been the fact that even before the war "high" theater was drastically losing its appeal: sometimes the booming cabaret was held responsible for this, sometimes the increasing popularity of cinema. In 1913, making a strong case against the idea that cinema was at fault, *De Kunst* urged the theater world to reflect upon its own lack of quality, its insignificant repertoire, the engagement of incompetent players and the endless re-staging of outdated plays.[92] If such a swipe came at all close to being an accurate depiction of the state of things in the theater, one can understand that a versatile actress like Caroline van Dommelen would have wanted to seek more exciting areas of employment. In doing so, she carried on a tradition of versatility among Dutch actors, which was indeed stimulated by wartime conditions but was not created by them. Like several of her colleagues from the-

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ater and operetta, she had, for instance, already ventured into working for the cinema in the early 1910s.[93] Caroline van Dommelen not only starred in but also wrote and directed films for Film-Fabriek F. A. Nöggerath,[94] the film production company owned by the director of the Flora *variété*-theater in Amsterdam. The art and cinema historian Ansje van Beusekom has pointed out that the connection between the Flora and the film production of this actress was a material, and financial, manifestation of the interrelationship between the revue and filmmaking in the Netherlands during those years.[95] When viewed from the perspective of the actors involved, the scope of such interrelationships can be broadened to include popular theater and film. As for Caroline van Dommelen, after having starred in six films, three of which she directed or co-directed, she gave up her commitment to cinema in 1912, because, in her own words, "it is such a nerve-wracking métier that you can't keep combining it with stage acting. It's the one or the other!"[96]

The new entertainment genres of revue and film, finally, were virtually simultaneously introduced in the Dutch *variété*. The format of the revue was copied from Paris, where, towards the end of the nineteenth century, every self-respecting *music-hall* would stage a revue at the end of the year. The French revues were structured around a loose thematic thread and were characterized by a satirical treatment of cultural, topical, and local matters; only after the turn of the century did they become increasingly spectacular. While I shall elaborate further on the Parisian revue when I consider Musidora, let it here suffice to say that the first Dutch revues, as written and staged by August Reyding beginning in 1889, followed the Parisian models in the satirical treatment of political and topical issues, according to the historian of the Dutch revue Dries Krijn.[97] Reyding's revues dealt primarily with typical Amsterdam tribulations, making a crucial contribution to the cultivation of Amsterdam folk types in Dutch *variété* and on the Dutch popular stage—a tradition of central importance to Adriënne Solser's stage persona.

Reyding also introduced the use of specially made film clips, DE LEVENDE GEÏLLUSTREERDE REUZEN-BRIEFKAARTEN (The Illustrated Giant Living Postcards), as integral inserts in his revue of 1899, "De Nieuwe Prikkel" (The New Prickle),[98] and thus initiated the close relation between Dutch revue and early cinema.[99] In her illuminating article, Beusekom delineates the reciprocal, multifaceted, and changing bonds between revue and film in the Netherlands. She marks out a trail leading from the omnivorous revue, which swallowed up more and more of *variété* attractions, including film, to the Dutch cinema of the 1920s, which brought forth a genre of its own, which, for its part, absorbed a variety of the revue's constituent elements. Most pertinent to Solser's stage career is what Beusekom writes about the changing relations between revue and *variété*. The absorptive tendency she ascribes to the revue may just as prop-

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erly be attributed to the *variété*, which generously accommodated new popular stage genres and helped them to find a public. Dutch *variété* was indeed overshadowed, yet not by the revue alone, but also by *volksstukken*, cabaret, and cinema: during the war, it lost its overarching function, and by 1917, *variété* acts had been relegated to the margins of cinema programs, revues, and cabaret.

While blurry boundaries and the co-existence of entertainment genres were the rule, the contours of an increasing distinction between the genres began to shine through during the early 1910s. One of the signs for this was the construction of new sites for the presentation of specific genres: the 1911-1912 season was marked by the opening of numerous cinemas in the major cities of entertainment,[100] and this was followed by the establishment of myriad cabarets. My investigation of the advertisements in local newspapers reveals that five cabarets opened during the spring of 1913 in Rotterdam alone. Dutch *variété* performers were to be found everywhere, in cinemas as well as in cabarets. Cato Culp, for instance, added luster to the screening of TOTENTANZ (The Dance of the Dead) with Asta Nielsen at the Thalia-Bioscooptheater in August 1912, and Adriënne Solser was on the bill of the Cabaret Metropole for the entire month of February 1914.[101] Another significant locale, opened in March 1913, was the "Rozen-Theater" in Amsterdam.[102] Situated in the district of the Jordaan, in less than a year, this cinema-*variété* theater developed into a home for sketches, plays, revues, operettas, and *variété* acts related to the genre of comedy named after the neighborhood: the "Jordaan-genre".

Between 1904 and 1914, Adriënne Solser, unlike many of her colleagues, did not often switch between genres, but stuck to the one she had initially chosen, that is to say, she appeared on stage predominantly as a soubrette doing solo acts. The number of female singers and actors performing solo or in duos had significantly increased by 1910. As most of the pioneering ones were still active, new voices and talents needed to distinguish themselves from them and from one another. The distinction between chiefly vocal performance on the one hand and performance that centered on comic acting was still pertinent, but within each mode, a further differentiation became vital. Throughout the years, the term soubrette was still used by female performers, yet other terms were coming into fashion at the same time. Such a multiplicity of labels points to a growing diversification in the field, not only among male comedians, but also and especially among female performers.

The singers among the soubrettes often used the labels *couplet-zangeres* (singer of verses), as did Betsy van der Heym;[103] *operette-zangeres* (operetta singer), as did Annie Backer; and *liederen-zangeres* (singer of German *Lieder*), as did Anna Klaasen and Julia Culp.[104] The reviews of their performances evoked the delicate and attentive atmosphere of cabaret more than the light-hearted and exuberant spirit of *variété*:

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> Mrs. Klaasen has a very good repertoire, varied and merry, and her delivery has the exquisite cachet that turns each song into a little genre-piece. Anna Klaasen does not merely sing her songs, she enacts them; every facetious verse she sings becomes a comic act, every pensive song, a miniature drama.[105]

The further success of the revue after the turn of the century, now in the form of a *reisrevue*, a traveling revue for a national audience, fostered a new type of female entertainer, the *commère*, a counterpart of the *conférencière* in cabaret. The separate acts and sketches of a revue were traditionally linked together by the *compère* and the *commère*, male and female entertainers who in a spirited and improvised dialogue guided the audience through the evening with introductions to the upcoming performers and with references to the thematic thread. Celebrated *commères* were, for instance, Rika Davids (1886-1943), active in revues starring her brother Louis and the former soubrette Mimi Boesnach (1899-1982), who became the leading lady of the Bouwmeester revue.[106] Adriënne Solser never performed in the role of the *commère*, although she might well have proven to be a good one, according to the chief editor of *De Kunst* and leading critic Nathan Heyman Wolf. In a 1916 article, in which he criticized popular stage managements for complaining about the war-related lack of first-class performers for *variété* and cabaret programs, Wolf argued and demonstrated that he, without much preparation, could compile at least six highly varied and excellent programs featuring Dutch actors alone. In one of these, Adriënne Solser was cast as the *commère,* an honor she shared in Wolf's proposal with Caroline van Dommelen, and with Piet Köhler as a *compère*.[107]

According to the reviews, Adriënne Solser's performances were imparted with an infectiousness similar to those of Louise Fleuron and Heintje Davids.[108] Later on in their careers, Fleuron and Solser came to share an equal fame in their performances of the type of *Komische Alte*: "the old spinster who on account of her romantic or other whims becomes the laughingstock of assorted stage adventures".[109] Fleuron performed this role in operettas, Solser, as we shall see, in cinema, albeit not as an old spinster but as a not so young married woman. Adriënne Solser took on comical, if not farcical, acts already during the 1910s. Critics used to remark upon the jocularity of her performance and its success with the public.[110] How she achieved her successes was made clear in this comment on one of her early performances in Amsterdam, in which she played a peasant woman from the province of Zeeland:

> As a *chanteuse à diction* she can compete with the best. Her creations are unaffected, without histrionic overemphasis, and, wherever in the world

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she might perform, everyone will understand her enchanting resonant laugh, her decently farcical action and diction.[111]

In the advertisements for Solser throughout the 1910s, the entire range of tags for the soubrettes of *variété* and cabaret appears: "Voordracht Soubrette" (1908), "Karakter Soubrette" (1909), "Hollandsche Soubrette" (1911), "Humoriste" (1912), "Neerlands Eerste Soubrette" (1912), "Neêrlands Eerste Cabaret-artiste" (1913), "Hollandsche Voordrachtskunstenares" (1914), "Humoristische Conférencière" (1916), and "Karakter-humoriste" (1919).[112] According to Klöters, the second term in such labels indicated the métier while the first expressed the means used;[113] the combination of "character" with "soubrette" or "humoriste," for instance, signified that the act was centered around a character from whose point of view the jokes and stories were presented. Thus, if "Hollandsche" (Dutch) was the adjective, the emphasis would be on the intelligibility of the acts, and the epithet "Neerlands Eerste" (the Netherlands' First), which was also used by, again, Louise Fleuron, rather signified ranking than sequence. The terms *voordrachtskunstenares* and *conférencière* originated, as we have seen, from the sophisticated cabaret while *humoriste* was the updated expression for the *komiek* or *couplet-zanger* or *-zangeres* from the *variété*. Wolf, in his proposal for good cabaret programs during the war, labeled Solser a "humoristische conférencière", a qualification that expressed and summarized her humorous, acting, and improvisational talents. What is interesting about the ensemble of labels, indeed, is that they suggest that a much greater variety of verses and subjects was presented than the reviews would otherwise indicate. This impression is confirmed by the "couplettenboeken" (notebooks with verses) of Solser's preserved at the EYE Filmmuseum, the contents of which offer insight into what was covered by the recurrent phrase "Mooi nieuw repertoire" (Fine new repertoire), with which the comic actress' appearances invariably were announced in the contemporary advertisements.

Entr'acte: Solser's Repertoire and Stage Persona

Adriënne Solser's preserved notebooks contain approximately fifty different verses and rhyming monologues, but their status within the whole of her stage repertoire remains uncertain. Considering that the collection does not contain anything from before 1904, and in view of the long duration of her stage career, her repertoire must have been more extensive than that. Given the fact that her earliest work is missing, it may also have in fact been more varied than it now seems to be. On occasion, in advertisements and reviews titles of acts are mentioned that do not match any of the texts preserved, as

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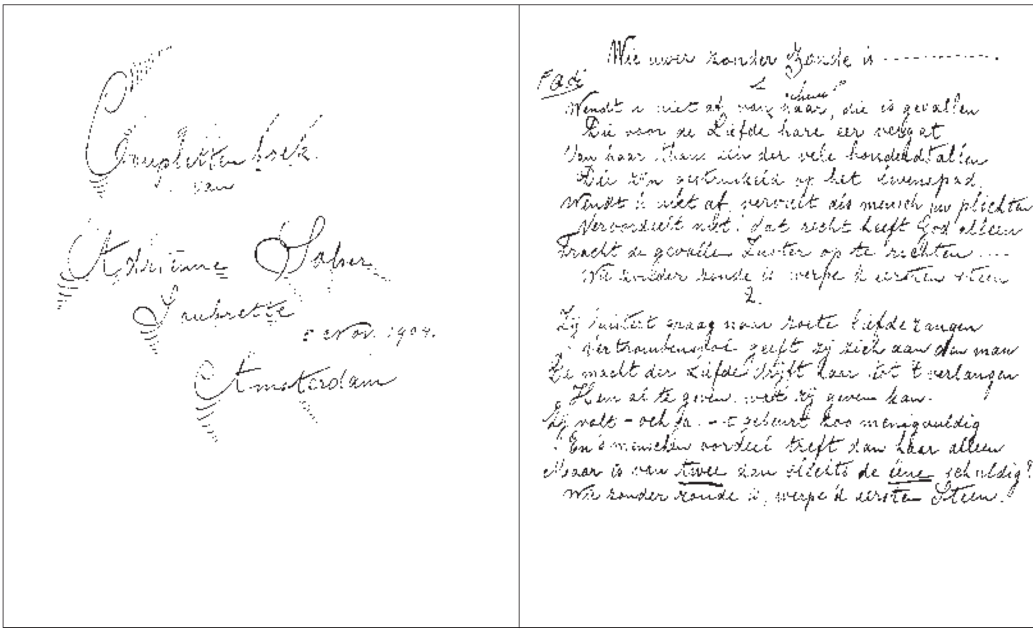


Fig. I.7: First pages of one of Solser's handwritten notebooks.

for instance the 1914 *karakterschets* (character sketch) "Ka als suffragette" (Ka as suffragette), also known as "De suffragette uit de Jordaan" (The suffragette from the Jordaan),[114] or the sketch of the female fish-monger in Ter Hall's revue "1918".[115] The question of the extent to which the preserved collection is representative of Solser's repertoire, can nevertheless be answered, though with due caution, by linking particular verses of hers to the rare reviews in which her performances are discussed with specificity sufficient to enable us to recognize the verse or act that was delivered. What then becomes clear is that the collection indeed contains several of her most popular acts. From the scanty dates in the notebooks it can also be established that from around 1914 onwards the character of the Jordaan woman began to figure prominently, which is a matter with which I shall deal presently. Last but not least, there is the question of who wrote the texts. Only in two or three cases are the verses followed by a person's name, but then without giving any indication of its significance. In a sole instance I have been able to retrieve an author by cross-referencing published articles, but that was because the writer himself referred to the particular verse. Even after the enactment of the law on copyright in 1912, it was not common practice in *variété* publicity or reviews for the author's names to be specified. In the Netherlands, the practice was that many performers either bought verses or commissioned writers to draft them.

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Whether Adriënne Solser did herself write any of the verses in her repertoire, remains therefore another unanswerable question.

Nevertheless, the collection as preserved discloses certain aspects of Adriënne Solser's performances, because they gave shape to her stage persona in terms of both the topics raised and the views conveyed. Once soubrettes and comedians belonged to the top of the field, they were advertised not by their acts, but by their names, their particular skills or specializations, and by such vague indications as "fine new repertoire". This practice implies that their public knew what to expect, that there was a continuity to their performances not only as regards comic or vocal talent but also in terms of stage persona. While bearing in mind Alex de Haas' warning not to take the texts simply at face value, I shall therefore scrutinize the verses in order to discern particular traits of Adriënne Solser's stage persona.

Most of the verses contain a simple but well-constructed plot, with a neat ending that allows for either a mild moralization or a surprise twist by way of conclusion. Their rhythm, however, lends them a light tone. Rhyme is carefully insisted upon and the refrains are catchy, which was typical of the *variété*. Some verses are mere nonsense poetry, playing with and punning on the sounds of words. An example is "Ik wou" (I wish), which ends with the wish: "I wish I were a string-bean, I would never have to go alone, for I would always be fetched".[116]

The verses breathe the edifying atmosphere that *variété* and other performing arts were then expected to uphold. The female protagonists repeatedly emphasize their decency and the texts contain nothing risqué or vulgar. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the Anna Judic song that Solser performed at the Vic in the early 1890s, and which is not contained in the notebooks, is suggestive of a degree of impishness. Some verses in the notebooks, moreover, deal with women's lust and libido in a strikingly candid manner as, for instance, one that goes under the title "Vrijen" (Making love), which features a peasant girl singing the praises of her fiancé's amorous attentions:

> Have you, young girls, so sweet,
> Not yet a lover taken?
> Then I'll tell a secret for you to repeat:
> Do visit us in the country,
> Sturdy farmers' boys we've got
> Strong-looking, what more do you want?
> And they'll show you soon
> They make love better than a gentleman.[117]

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While this verse was part of Adriënne Solser's pre-war repertoire, later on in her career, she used to deliver another, both more daring and more complex verse on the subject: "Jammer dat niemand het ziet" (Pity, no one shall see it). It is included in a notebook dated October 4, 1935,[118] when Adriënne Solser had already reached the age of sixty. Moreover, for around two decades, she had been known to be a voluptuous woman, a feature that she did not hesitate to poke fun at during her performances. The first-person narrator of the verse informs the audience of her longing for a man:

> But once homewards I've made my way,
> And have removed my clothes of the day,
> In the mirr'r I look
> And nearly faint with desire
> Then inside I feel so wondrous,
> So lonely, sep'rate, curious,
> And indeed I could scream with sorrow -
> Pity, no one shall see it.[119]

In the next strophe she specifies that she is quivering with lust, to contend in the refrain:

> After the stroke of midnight's hour, when
> All alone my form I admire, then
> I do not find it that unattractive
> Pity, no one shall see it.[120]

With Solser's age and physique in one's mind's eye, it is difficult to imagine that she could have delivered this verse without at least a dose of irony vis-à-vis her body. Be that as it may, the vantage-point here is that of the first-person female narrator, and her looking at herself does seem to add something sensual to the irony.

The verses contain few references to topical matters or to politics, which accords with a remark made by Solser in a letter she wrote in the 1930s to the board of film censors and in which she stated: "I myself do not care for politics."[121] The war, patriotism, or new laws concerning alcohol use and morals come up in her verses, but they usually do not constitute the main topic; rather, they function as prompts for commenting upon situations or upon the experiences of individuals affected by them. An exception was made for the issue of women's suffrage, which in any case had already become one of the most popular butts of Dutch *variété*, all the more so since, in 1908, Chrétienni and Louisette had commissioned Rido to write an entire—and highly acclaimed—

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revue with Louisette in the role of a leading women's liberation activist.[122] Unfortunately, the verse "Ka als suffragette", as was noted above, has not been preserved, and on the basis of the surviving repertoire it is impossible to say what twists and turns it might have included. This notwithstanding, the repertoire contains one verse, "Verschillende meeningen over Algemeen Kiesrecht" [123] (Various opinions on Universal Suffrage), which could only have been written after Dutch women obtained suffrage in 1920 and probably dates from around the moment when they first went to the polls in May 1921.[124] It lists various responses to the new possibility of suffrage and it features a good number of the characters peopling Solser's verses. There are working-class women, who either hope that "women turn the Lower Chamber/Into the finest room in the house",[125] or are burdened with work to the extent that they cannot even think of making a choice; there are two old spinsters, one of whom will vote for a woman to avenge herself upon men, none of whom ever wanted her, while the other will indeed vote for one "even if only for the illusion/that I actually can choose a man";[126] and then there is the prostitute who does not care one way or the other. Men are displeased with the new situation. The verse ends with a sensible woman, who summons other women to take up the responsibility they now share with men in this century of woman. The argument made has little substance, and the text is not very witty; however, since topical matters were of only minor concern in Solser's repertoire, it is worth noting that in this question she made an exception and had her stage persona rejoice in women finally obtaining the right to vote.

One of her copywriters, Uiltje (literally: owlet)—a pseudonym used by two journalists at *De Telegraaf* for signing their satirical output, David Orobio de Castro and G. Blok[127]—once noted that Adriënne Solser did not like to take sides. He had written for her a verse satirizing housemaids from the perspective of their mistresses. Solser was indeed willing to take it on in her repertoire, Uiltje recalled, but only under the condition that he write a companion verse, in which the mistresses were indicted from the maids' point of view, "for, in her view, one-sidedness was completely out of the question."[128] Whether this was Solser's sincere motivation, or whether she just made Uiltje believe it was, remains uncertain. It is proper, however, to raise this question in the two contexts of Uiltje's observation and of Solser's repertoire. The writer regretted having met with Solser's request because he—quite boastfully—feared having contributed to the maids'—as he would have it, ridiculous—demands for higher salaries. In retrospect, he felt the need to distance himself from a viewpoint he had promoted but did not himself support. Solser's repertoire contains far more verses sympathizing with working-class people than with the well-to-do, and when the latter are represented, the purpose is to emphasize differences of class.[129] My impression, therefore, is that Solser did not so

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much refuse to take sides, as she preferred not to take only the side chosen by the author, that is to say, the side of the mistresses.

Instead of politics and topical matters, the verses usually deal with poor people's lives, differences between men and women, and with women's experiences. The verses about poor people are often mildly moralistic, calling for empathy with those who are quickly condemned, or exposing the hypocrisy of those of a higher social rank. A touching example of the first is the rhyming monologue "De dief"[130] (The thief), about a poor man who is about to burgle a rich man's house on St. Nicholas Eve[131] in order to buy some food and gifts for his daughter. In the house, he encounters a girl of his own child's age, who believes him to be St. Nicholas returning to bring her even more presents than she had already received. Upon learning the thief's true intentions, the girl hands him her new doll to give to her "little sister". Her generosity and solidarity generate remorse in the man, who vows that he will never again attempt to get money in a dishonest way.

Hypocrisy is tackled in a subtle way in another monologue, "De Sina's appelschil" (The orange peel). It unmasks the manner in which people tend to strike at those lower than they in the social hierarchy merely in order to make themselves feel better. A "fine man", a baron, nearly slips on an orange peel; he blames his wife; she blames the old maid, who blames the servant, and he the kitchen maid. Having no one below herself in the house, the latter, in her turn, leaves to blame the woman at the greengrocer's, who talks back to the girl instead of continuing the downward spiral. I like this monologue for three reasons in particular. First, its Lisa-and-the-bucket-structure is as effective as it is deceiving, in that it seems to be but a harmless verse, only at the end revealing its built-in irony. Secondly, it introduces the folk woman, who talks big but is good at heart, and who refuses to let herself be bullied by someone who is or merely pretends to be higher in the social hierarchy. Finally, this folk woman is astute and does not fear to break the mechanism in which the girl is caught. These are the basic and sympathetic characteristics of the character of "Bet" whom Adriënne Solser would soon create and embody on-stage and on-screen. Now, the dating of this text is as problematic as it is pertinent. It appears in a notebook before the only verse provided with a date, namely, April 1914. If the sequence of verses is a chronological one, then this vegetable vendor may be understood as being a seminal draft of the persona of Bet. Here, the monologue would suggest that the persona was a conception of Solser's from 1914 or before, which, unfortunately, is all there is to be known about its early manifestations.

Another verse dealing with hypocrisy, in this case among the clergy, is one of the best of the entire collection. This verse, written in French, poses as a young girl's confession that she has been seeing a young man. It consists of

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twelve stanzas with four lines each, suggesting an exchange of questions and answers between the girl, named Brigitte, and her priest. Brigitte's confession comes in brief lines and is in each case followed by the priest encouraging her to reveal more:

> If you please, go on
> My darling Brigitte
> Whatever next did happen
> I implore you to tell.[132]

What is so great about this verse is that the repetitive rhythm co-operates in creating the content, in that it contributes to suggesting the prurient curiosity of the priest, which is eventually exposed in all clarity in the final stanza, when Brigitte reveals what it was that she showed to her date: "My photographic portrait, Mr. Priest," whereupon the priest answered, in, as I surmise, immense disappointment:

> In the end, you're a bother
> Brigitte, I now leave you
> One does not trouble one's Father
> With so small a sin.[133]

In addition to the ingénue, the *chanteuse*, the prostitute, the maid, and the mistress, Solser's repertoire featured female professionals typical of the 1910s, such as the points-woman for the railroads, and the policewoman. The points-woman is not only made fun of, but also presented as a widowed mother and a responsible and dutiful worker, who explains to the audience what her job entails.[134] The policewoman apparently was a rather new phenomenon, which is conveyed by means of puns and wise-cracks. For instance, it is suggested that a feminine form of the Dutch word "agent" did not yet exist, but the proper one, "agente," had been carefully omitted from those used in the text: "Agenteres, Agenterin, Agenteuse, Agentrice".[135] Potentially very funny is the self-mockery concerning Solser's own girth, which she turns into the policewoman's advantage by declaring that "this is the first policeman they cannot take for a ride, so we may be sure that this first Agenteuse was deemed enough of a heavyweight when they chose her."[136] The policewoman's job allows for commentary on social wrongs, and here there thus return, among others, the woman abandoned by her husband as well as the unemployed man who has to steal his food. The woman is advised to leave her man and the man without a job will not be arrested, as far as the policewoman is concerned.

Although Solser created for herself a stage persona that was not a feminist

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or a suffragette in the political sense of the word, this persona did maintain straightforward views about the wrongs of men vis-à-vis women. Men who mislead and cheat on women form a recurrent issue in the collection, and the stage persona often assures her audience that she defends the decency that men threaten. It is highly unlikely, within the context of the performance, that a passage such as the following would have come to mean something other than what it seems to say:

> Though he call you his darling beauty
> Do not trust him, beware, he lies [...]
> His greatest pleasure
> Is spoiling your ingenuousness.[137]

This particular verse counteracts its initial accusation by consoling men in the last stanza:

> For, oh, the earth
> Without men wasn't worth
> And, do believe me, I can
> Not live without a sweet man.[138]

Other verses do not do so, as for instance the one in which men are depicted as foxes:

> If the woman is sly
> A fox is the man likewise
> His tricks are always well-planned out
> If there's something to catch.[139]

The harshest descriptions of men's evil attitudes towards women are to be found in the various songs about soubrettes and prostitutes. One soubrette, for instance, describes her conflicting feelings: on stage she has to pretend to be happy and merry, while in her heart she is devastated because her husband cheated on her and then abandoned her and her child, whereupon the baby died of grief.[140] The song, from a notebook with texts dating from 1907 to 1918, echoes the discussion about the splits between the on- and off-stage lives of soubrettes that was pervasive during the 1910s; or, in another song, a woman became a prostitute and an alcoholic after she had been left by her lover: "I sacrificed my honor on the altar of love, all for the one who thereupon left me."[141] As did the verse about the thief, this song calls for empathy with an outcast.

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On the other hand, some verses do also criticize women's attitude towards men. For instance, a song with the seemingly unambiguous title "De mannen begrijpen ons niet"[142] (Men don't understand us) ridicules women's complaints about men's incomprehension; it is even conceivable that, if presented in a certain manner, it might have turned into a parody of women feigning too much naiveté about their own behavior. Some verses in Solser's repertoire indeed presented women as being as inscrutable and selfish as men are tyrannical:

The women are no more unswerving
This I quite frankly say
Love sometimes is too demanding
And then it soon blows away.[143]

The context of this stanza is the ironic question why all women prefer different types of men, while what they want from them is always the very same thing. Within Solser's preserved repertoire, however, verses criticizing men are in the majority. One even opens with a comment on her male colleagues: "if one listens to comedians, they praise the men; women are ridiculed, we don't get angry"[144] But, as irony would have it, these lines stem from the verse that unmasks women's self-indulgence, to which I have already referred.

Prostitutes and *chanteuses* are represented as the poorest devils among women, for the older they get, the more they will be rejected by both men and society. Alcohol is often the only friend they have left. Such are the women's fates depicted in "De bloem der terrassen"[145] (The flower of the sidewalk cafés), "De chanteuse",[146] "De trap der dronkenschap"[147] (The ladder of drunkenness), and "De nachtvlinder"[148] (The night-owl). None of these verses has a reproving tone, in fact they sound rather compassionate:

Do allay her great pain
Don't treat her with disdain
They've too known it who now laughter feign:
Do have pity, please.[149]

In a way, these texts sustain the sleazy image of the profession, which they even exacerbate in support of their aim to ask for pity for these victims of circumstance. At first sight, it seems strange that even a thriving professional in the field such as Solser would include in her repertoire such cliché-ridden images of her profession, when they diverged so obviously from her personal experience and practice; this, in contrast with Louise Fleuron, for instance, who sang at least one song presenting a more realistic picture of the conditions of

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her work.[150] The practice of employing copy-writers, and these mostly men,[151] may constitute one explanation for the divergence of image and experience displayed in verses delivered by Solser, but, given that we do not know the full range of the spectrum from which she could make her selections, these conditions cannot be further determined. The key to the question, however, seems to be offered by one of the professional requirements pointed out earlier, so aptly summarized by Louisette's portraitist: the soubrette's art "needs a certain quick and buoyant jollity [...] *which excludes all subjectivity*."[152] This elimination of subjectivity, and thus of a direct appeal by the actress to the spectator's possible empathy with herself, corresponds to one of the essential conditions for creating laughter, as defined by Henri Bergson in his study of the comical: "laughter is incompatible with emotion. Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."[153]Adriënne Solser and her colleagues in *variété* must have perfectly understood this point, and it is for this reason that the texts she delivered can be read as expressions of personal experiences or views of neither the performers nor the authors. Rather, they reflect prevailing yet select opinions and discussions of the time.

All in all, Adriënne Solser's stage persona came close to a common woman, who was clever enough not to let herself be fooled by life, class, men, or language. At times she was archaic, but, most often, she shows her acquaintance with modern life. She displays a strong commitment to the social fates of women and outcasts. Neither topical matters nor politics were her subject, yet they could serve as a welcome background for dealing with the way people's lives were affected by social circumstances. One, still detectable, aspect of Solser's comedy was that she played on her hefty physique, a comic device which she further developed and utilized in the character for which she subsequently became known.

THE YEARS OF CHARACTER COMEDY, 1914-1920

After 1914, Adriënne Solser earned more and more acclaim—from both critics and audiences—as a *karakter-humoriste* (satirical singer in character), most notably when she played the role of the Amsterdam (or sometimes Rotterdam) folk woman. In 1915, for instance, she appeared in a small "Jordaan-revue" by Rido at the Rozen-Theater, in which she had two parts: a poor woman mourning her son's death in the war, and a middle-class spouse. All of it was delivered "in strict Jordaan dialect" by "Adriënne Solser—the petty bourgeois missus with a thundering voice, who shakes the audience's ears when she sings to her husband: 'Give me a kiss'".[154] Solser's assignment to the theater,

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which, in the meantime had become known as the foremost outlet for the Jordaan genre, was renewed for the first two weeks of October 1915, in a *variété* program including a farce written by Tony Schmitz.[155] The folk woman impersonated by Solser tended to become a woman selling vegetables or fish at the market, as was the case in a revue mounted by Ter Hall with Louise Fleuron as the *commère*.[156]

Adriënne Solser as the Amsterdam Folk Woman

By 1918, Solser had come chiefly to personify the woman from the Amsterdam working-class quarter the Jordaan, a part of the city famous for the humor, good-heartedness, idiosyncrasy, and candor of its inhabitants. Two of the earliest references to such a creation of Solser's that I have been able to retrieve from the newspapers date from January and February 1914, when she was announced with her new *karakterschets* "Ka als suffragette" (also entitled "De suffragette uit de Jordaan") in the Rozen-Theater in Amsterdam and in the Cabaret Metropole in Rotterdam, respectively.[157] One year later, Solser had fixed the female character's first name and occupation, establishing the persona she would feature throughout her further career: "Great popular success for Adriënne Solser in her [...] creation 'Big Bet from the vegetable market'" *De Kunst* noted;[158] and the daily *Haagsche Courant* identified "Bolle Bet uit de Willemsstraat (te Amsterdam)" (Big Bet from the Willemsstreet in Amsterdam) as being "a very nice creation".[159] From then on, the market woman from the Jordaan named Bet (or, less frequently, Ka or Kee) became Solser's most prominent stage persona, regardless of whether she was embellished with the soubriquet "bolle" (big), "tante" (aunt), or "de koningin van de Jordaan" (the queen of the Jordaan). By 1919, then, Solser was generally known as "the popular character comedienne, known for her hilarious delivery of folk types from Amsterdam and Rotterdam".[160] This is rather interesting considering that, after the rise of the *salonkomiek* and the *humoriste*, such sustained preference for character comedy had gone out of fashion among male and female *variété* performers.[161] None of Adriënne Solser's female colleagues is known to have cultivated such a clear-cut comic persona during the 1920s. Revue and cabaret, moreover, stimulated versatility. Contrary to these trends, Adriënne Solser would make character comedy into a trademark during the rest of her career.

Adriënne Solser's preserved notebooks contain several texts with the Bet character as protagonist, including the above-mentioned verse "Bolle Bet uit de Willemsstraat". Like the monologue "Bolle Bet gaat aan 't tooneel" (Big Bet goes on stage) in the same notebook, which dates from the mid-1910s, and the 1918 dialogue "Bet en Hein aan 't tooneel" (Bet and Hein on stage), the

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verse features the Jordaan character trying her luck on the popular stage. The refrain of the verse offers an introduction of the character to her audience:

> Here you have Big Bettie,
> Known all throughout the town,
> She likes things when they're funny,
> There she enjoys renown;
> Around here she's the heartiest,
> Not to mention the bulkiest,
> Greeted wherever she may trot:
> Big Bettie from the Willemsstraat.[162]

The "plot" informs us that she used to be a green-grocer, but hopes to earn more money in the *variété*, and, because she is still new to the stage, she invites the audience to help her by singing along with the refrain. The prose text "Bolle Bet gaat aan 't tooneel" is a satirical account of Bet's stage career. The "story" is that she aspired to join the comic theater, which, like the operetta, was more esteemed than the *variété*, but none of the extant companies wanted her, despite her alleged talents. She asserts that she actually felt what she enacted, and that she made others feel it too: she once knocked her stage partner down, sending him to the hospital. When confronting each genre, Adriënne Solser's own peculiarities were used: one company did not want her because of her big mouth, another because of her lack of dramatic training, and, for the revue, her legs were too plump. That is why, in the end, she announced that she was establishing her own company: "What I offer is not a parade of legs, no 'asem' in exile, but real genuine spine-tingling folk plays."[163] Thus, the Bet persona made fun of Solser's profession, career, ambitions, and physique all at once.

In the 1918 dialogue, Bet is a cleaning woman who is married to Hein, an electrician. The entire conversation deals with their aspirations to go on-stage and display their versatile talents. The traits of this presentation of Bet are even more specifically traceable to Adriënne Solser personally. For instance, she originated from a family of actors, enjoyed hardly any education, and was high-spirited. I am aware that I am getting into a tricky subject by pointing out such similarities, when I myself argued earlier that Solser's verses and her own experience and attitude were not correlative. And yet I am not arguing that the Bet persona should be identified with the actress who created her, or the other way around. My point is that, in the Bet texts, *some* of Solser's oddities were indeed inserted into her stage persona. This raises two questions: who wrote the texts, and what were the conditions and effects of these insertions? My answer to the first question may well be debatable, but it seems plausible to

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claim that Adriënne Solser had input in these prose texts. The second question requires a more extended treatment. One of the conditions for playing on her own oddities was her fame and the stage persona she had thus far developed. As I have noted above, the Bet persona was a common woman clever enough not to be fooled. In the Bet texts, then, it turns out that this common woman has ambitions for the stage. The insertion of Solser's own oddities into the texts must have had a comical purpose as well as effect: they were a droll device to be added to the actress' mockery of her own physique. Her career and talents as a *variété* performer were employed for creating fun. On top of that, the Bet persona was confined to a specific form of entertainment. At one point in the conversation between Bet and Hein, Bet demonstrates her talent to singing "operaam" (literally, an open window), but as a composite it sounds like "opera". From the surviving text, it remains unclear whether Solser indeed was capable of singing opera, or whether she just delivered a persiflage; either way, Hein does not care for such singing, he finds it too high-flown. In response to his disapproval, Bet asks, "Well, what do you want then? It was pure art, wasn't it?" and he answers: "That's why it's no good. The audience doesn't want art. People want to laugh."[164] This observation about the audiences' preferences during the 1910s was in line with Solser's own experience on the popular stage. The dialogue, moreover, refers to a divide within the realm of popular entertainment, which had manifested itself by 1918 in clearer definitions of genres. Quite in contrast to the pre-war period, with its mixed programming and blurry boundaries, by the end of the war, a performer either made art or induced people to laugh. With her Bet persona, Adriënne Solser explicitly chose the latter.

Stage History of Amsterdam Folk Characters

When Adriënne Solser picked up the Amsterdam folk woman as her chief stage persona around the mid-teens, the character already had a history on the popular stage. It belonged to what, in retrospect, would be labeled the "Jordaan-genre" or "Jordaankomedie" (Jordaan-comedy): a specific type of Dutch popular theater and cinema that was as well-liked by the public as it was an increasing cause of controversy in the eyes of critics and historians from the mid-1910s until the 1930s.

The contemporary term *volksstukken*, folk or people's plays, had acquired two meanings in Dutch theater history: it referred to the folk dramas by Herman Heyermans, on the one hand, and to the Amsterdam comic plays by Herman Bouber, on the other. Although Bouber's comic plays are sometimes discussed in theater history, they are typically marginalized.[165] Literary history,

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moreover, has canonized only Heyermans' dramas, thereby relegating Bouber's plays to the margins of popular culture and as failing to meet the standards of literature.[166] In consequence, a history of the Amsterdam *volksstukken* as they emerged and attained the height of popularity during the 1910s, is now due to be written.

Herman Heyermans was a socialist playwright and critic who wrote popular plays at the turn of the century for the legitimate stage. His 1900 fisherman's drama "Op hoop van zegen" (The Good Hope) ran for years; it had two hundred performances by May 1903 and five hundred by January 1915, and in its status as a genuine *volksstuk*, it has been adapted to cinema four times between 1918 and 1986. The role of the tragic mother, Kniertje, who loses all her sons in a shipwreck, was repeatedly played by the leading Heyermans actress Esther de Boer-van Rijk,[167] on-stage as well as in two film adaptations. While highly esteemed for their naturalistic style and their dramatic and literary qualities, Heyermans' plays about the social wrongs and the misery of the poor also met much critique from viewers, not only from anti-socialists,[168] but also from those who argued for a less idealistic and a more light-hearted and cheerful representation of Dutch people. An astute articulation of this quest for a more merry approach can be found in a review of the aforementioned comic operetta "'n Amsterdamsche Hartjesdag" by Johan Kelly, in which Adriënne Solser played one of the Jordaan women roaming the streets the night before the annual fair. The critic compared the production to the work of seventeenth-century Dutch poets,[169] on the one hand, and to contemporary realist plays—read: Heyermans' works—on the other:

> Kelly succeeds in being true without bringing too much reality on stage. [...] What makes Kelly far removed from the realists of our times and renders him more akin to the seventeenth-century playwrights, is that he still notices people laughing in real life, that according to him not all faces are sour and not all eyes gloomy, that people open their mouths for other things than defending or disputing theories.[170]

The aspect of cheerfulness missing from Heyermans' social dramas, found representation in the *Jordaan-komedies*, which were basically a mixture of social drama and comic scenes set in the Amsterdam neighborhood of the Jordaan or peopled with archetypical characters from the district. The chief examples of this specific genre were the *volksstukken* of the couple Herman and Aaf Bouber, who, from 1915 onwards, wrote and staged the core stock of *Jordaan-komedies* still known to this day. But before elaborating upon those plays and their relation to Adriënne Solser's work, it is necessary first to discuss the vivid and genre-crossing tradition of staging light *volksstukken* and

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Amsterdam characters that was established during the interval between Heyermans and the Bouber couple: between 1900 and 1915, that is. In so doing, the characteristics of the genre will be illuminated and the meanings of the prefix *volks-* (folk) will be explored.

The Jordaan was and is a quarter in the centre of Amsterdam, which was, at the time, a working-class district characterized by the low social standard and the poor living conditions of at least half of its population.[171] It was also a rebellious neighborhood, whose history included various revolts, such as the potato-riot of 1919, and strikes against the reduction of relief subsidies and the rise of rents during the 1920s and 1930s. Bert Hogenkamp has pointed out that such social and political activism, however, was neither a topic nor a perspective included in the fictional genre in which the Jordaan featured, be it in plays or in films.[172] Rather, this genre focused on the idiosyncrasy and the humor of the neighborhood folk and on their putative loyalty and verbal assertiveness. The residents, "Jordanezen", were notorious for their idioms—a combination of local flavor and a sociolect of their own—and for their colorful wise-cracks.[173] The Jordaan genre was peopled with outspoken characters like Bet, Hein, Kee, Janus, Ka, Mie, and Dries, who were embellished with traits like candidness, chumminess, and insouciance. In the words of the influential critic Barbarossa, these figures were a "blend of benevolence, decorum, and good-for-nothing",[174] which helped them master whatever problems might arise.

Because it was set in the neighborhood and it gently parodied typical Jordaan folks, the operetta "'n Amsterdamsche Hartjesdag" may be considered as an early sample of the Jordaan genre. Moreover, as in the plays of the Bouber couple, music took on an important role in it. In addition to such intertextual kinship, extra-textual interrelations may be detected when the sites of the theatrical presentation and, consequently, the make-up of the audience are considered. The operetta was staged at the Frascati-Schouwburg run by Gustave Prot and son, known as "the theater of laughs",[175] which had established a tradition of offering plays about and for Amsterdam people as an alternative to their usual bill of French boulevard comedies and operettas. The comical operettas known as "the Prot genre" were famous for their lush staging—Gustave Prot Sr. was originally a set-designer—and for their fine cast: comedians and soubrettes hired by Prot were considered to have taken a step up in the stage hierarchy. Newspaper reports of the Solsers on Prot's stage, for instance, bear witness to this idea.

The Frascati-Schouwburg was one of the playhouses in the Plantage neighbourhood of Amsterdam, where the Schouwburg Stoel en Spree, later known as the Plantage-Schouwburg, and the Artis-Schouwburg, later renamed the Hollandsche Schouwburg, were located as well. Before the turn of the cen-

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tury, these playhouses were known for programming light and racy comedies, comic operettas, and sensational melodramas, called "draken" (literally: dragons) in the Dutch vernacular. They used to draw large crowds of common people, both from the neighboring Jewish quarter and from the Jordaan district. Around 1900, these playhouses turned into nurseries for *volksstukken*, a function they upheld for decades to come. In particular, at the turn of the century, the Schouwburg Stoel en Spree began hosting plays about Amsterdam and its people, a trend followed during the 1910s by the Hollandsche Schouwburg. Central to this development was Marius Spree (1876-1929), a playwright, leading actor, and one of the directors of the Schouwburg Stoel en Spree. Throughout his life and career, Spree showed himself an enduring personality in the writing, performing, and staging of Dutch *volksstukken,* plays that were were performed in both Amsterdam and Rotterdam as well as taking these cities as their setting.[176] Together with Frits Stoel, Spree undertook the exploitation of the Amsterdam theater in 1895, and, in 1901, it was noted that a significant change had taken place at the Plantage-Schouwburg.[177] Instead of sensational melodramas, more and more "slices of reality"[178] were staged, to enormous applause.[179] Spree had adapted several short stories written by Justus van Maurik, a famous chronicler of day and night-life in Amsterdam, for the popular stage. One of these stories was "Teun de Nachtwacht" (Teun, the Night-watchman),

> a sad story [...], although the folly and the comical behavior of the neighbors make people roar with laughter. [...] The audience took such pleasure in the scenes, cheering and laughing so loudly during the performance that the actors could no longer be heard. People were laughing their heads off.[180]

The lively involvement of the audience was not only a phenomenon typical of the Plantage neighborhood, but would accompany the genre as long as it remained popular. A significant element employed by Spree was the use of the broad Amsterdam tongue. Last but not least, the plays were highly appreciated for their elevating and heartening intent.[181] Such slightly moralizing tendencies and the happy endings became two of the characteristics of folk comedies. Spree's plays "Jan Smees", "Mottige Janus" (Pock-Marked Janus), and "Rooie Sien", are still among those considered as epitomizing the genre. The sobriquet of the female protagonist Kee in "Jan Smees" was "Koningin van de Jordaan" (Queen of the Jordaan),[182] a phrase that Adriënne Solser borrowed in the early 1920s for the title of her first film in the BET series.

Dries Krijn has pointed out another, nearly simultaneous emergence of Jordaan characters, beginning with August Reyding's 1897 revue "Luilekker-

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land" (Land of milk and honey).[183] Krijn depicts the character, Pietje Puck, as a womanizer, a loafer and a sponger, whereas his wife's only characterizing feature is her nickname, Zwarte Kardoes (Black Puss). Likewise, Klöters avows that the cult of the *Jordaan-komedie* was initiated by this revue.[184] According to Krijn, however, Pietje Puck and Zwarte Kardoes were preceded by the Amsterdam couple Thomasvaer and Pieternel, who were the characters of a comic opera which, by that time, had invariably been performed after the traditional Amsterdam New Year's Day staging of one of the classics of the Dutch theater, Vondel's "Geysbrecht van Aemstel" for more than a century.[185] The roles of Thomasvaer and Pieternel commented upon the events of the year gone by from a local perspective. In short, local characters gained popularity almost simultaneously in a variety of theatrical genres around 1900. The writings by Justus van Maurik and J. Werumeus Bunink upon which Marius Spree based his plays, further fuelled the interest in Amsterdam and its people and legitimated it from the side of popular literature, a function to be taken over in the course of the 1910s by the novels of Israel Querido. It was most notably this author's four-part Jordaan cycle, published between 1912 and 1925,[186] that showed the life of the people, their folk humor and their local tongue, to be fit for literary treatment; while other writers proved that all of this could appeal highly to audiences and critics when dramatized for the popular stage.

Marius Spree was one of the actors instrumental to the rise of the Jordaan genre who also wrote the plays that constituted the genre.[187] Most of the players in the field, however, preferred to separate the labor of writing from acting and directing. Lion Solser used to plot the basic idea for the Jordaan sketches of the Ensemble Solser en Hesse, besides doing the stage direction and starring in them, but he commissioned others to author and draw up the pieces.[188] One of his authors was Tony Schmitz (1879-1920), the highly prolific composer of verses for, among many others, Louise Fleuron and Nap de la Mar.[189] Through his four sketches written for the Ensemble Solser en Hesse, Schmitz contributed significantly to the early popularity of the Jordaan genre as did Rido, who authored the first Solser en Hesse sketch in 1910 and subsequently wrote many revues about Amsterdam and the Jordaan, in one of which Adriënne Solser performed.[190] Last but not least, there were, of course, Herman Bouber and his wife Aaf Bouber-ten Hoope.[191] Their "Mooie Neel" (Pretty Nell), "Bleeke Bet", "Oranje Hein" (Orange Hein), "Ronde Ka" (Round Ka), and "De Jantjes" (The Jack-tars), became as synonymous with the genre as Spree's title-characters were.

The writing of *Jordaan-komedies* required precision because the plays and characters staged before and during the 1910s were primarily aimed at—and most often reached—the audience they portrayed and parodied, and it was precisely the people of the Jordaan who composed the critical public that was

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known never to laugh out of politeness.[192] As in the review of Spree's "Teun de Nachtwacht", contemporary press reports remark upon the public's response as an indication whether or not this delicate endeavor had been successfully delivered. Jan Grootveld, the actor who played Pietje Puck in Reyding's revue, had personally experienced the warm embrace of the Jordaan folks, who had invited him to their neighborhood and had lionized him during an entire afternoon in order to pay tribute to the character he had created.[193] When Bouber's "Bleeke Bet" was staged at the Hollandsche Schouwburg in 1918, critics once more noted the engaged and cheerful response of the public from the Jordaan.[194] A rather sarcastic but no less telling account of the popularity of the genre with the people of the Jordaan was provided by a columnist who was unable to attend the 1915 performance of a revue by Rido in the Rozen-Theater, which was situated right in the middle of the district, frequented by many of the locals, and a centre for the genre since the outbreak of the war. The house—with one thousand seats—was fully booked three days in advance! And the critic sighed:

> The future of authors and theater managers lies in the Jordaan, I tell you.
> Adam in Exile? A Midsummer Night's Dream?
> Outdone. An era gone by.
> "Cauliflower Hein" and "Shrimp Bet."
> That's the future!
> Hail the Jordaan! Hail the Jordaan![195]

This column was one of the few manifestations of the growing irritation in the theater press with the popularity of the Jordaan genre, which was mainly expressed in the shape of neglect and omission. In its sarcastic account of the impossibility of attending these popular shows, however, this particular comment illuminates one important factor in that irritation: the critic felt excluded from the party. In this case, it was a physical exclusion, but the experience probably fed into an alienation from the genre to which professional critics were increasingly susceptible. This alienation was a result of the direct and collective appeal of the Jordaan plays to the audience to whom they were addressed. In contrast to Heyermans' dramas, these *volksstukken* were not just *about* the common people, but they belonged to them and to their folk culture.

In his reminiscences of those times, Rido pointed out that the Ensemble Solser en Hesse was the direct forerunner of the Jordaan genre of which Herman and Aaf Bouber were to become the main historical representatives.[196] By emphasizing this, Rido laid claim to having been a co-initiator of the genre, as he was the one whom Lion Solser had commissioned to author the ensemble's first Jordaan sketch. The format of Solser en Hesse's sketches was indeed

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new, constituting an expansion of their earlier *karakterschetsen*, little sketches built around prototypes.[197] According to the necrologies of Lion Solser, who died by his own hand on August 3, 1915, Solser en Hesse were instrumental to the introduction of one-act plays to the Dutch *variété*. By 1910, their *karakterschetsen* had evolved into longer farcical sketches. In contrast to what Spree had done and to what Bouber was going to do, that is to say, to create social drama with comic scenes and side characters, Solser en Hesse focused chiefly on gags and gimmicks, on begetting laughter, while incidentally including some dramatic moments. Just as Spree had done, however, they made use of Amsterdam slang on stage. They also inserted sing-a-longs and dance numbers into the show, which enabled the audience to engage in collective and active participation. In this latter regard, they were following the model established by Jan Grootveld as Pietje Puck, whose refrain and dance had been the hit numbers of the revue "Luilekkerland".[198] Such was the genre of Jordaan sketches as exemplified by the Ensemble Solser en Hesse.

Lion Solser and Piet Hesse (1872-1936) had both been employed at the Plantage-Schouwburg before they began as a verse-singing itinerant duo working the provincial festivities in 1897.[199] After having married the Prot soubrettes Adriënne Willemsens and Anna Slauderof, they established Ensemble Solser en Hesse around 1900, with the four of them as the main actors. Lion Solser was the artistic and Piet Hesse the commercial director of the troupe. Occasionally, another Solser brother, Louis, would join in as an extra, while Adriënne stood in for Lion only during the last months before his death.[200]

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Ensemble Solser en Hesse belonged to the most sought-after attractions of the Flora and the Circus Carré in Amsterdam, and the Casino Variété in Rotterdam, while they also continued to tour the country and occasionally returned to play at the Plantage theater district.[201] The success of their 1909 parody of one of the classics of Dutch theater, Joost van den Vondel's "Adam in ballingschap", encouraged them to hire a theater for September 1910 and to create a *kermisstuk*, a piece for the fair. Even though the fairs had been suspended, the traditional month of the fair—August for Rotterdam, September for Amsterdam, and May for The Hague—was still celebrated with playhouses that offered unpretentious entertainment.[202] Unpretentiousness was not a pejorative notion but rather accepted as a valid classification for *vermaakskunst* (the art of entertainment) and self-confidently employed by the makers of the farces and revues presented. Before and during the war, the audiences and the popular theater press alike considered it an achievement if performers succeeded in entertaining them throughout the performance and even more so if the shows were jocose, like those of the Ensemble Solser en Hesse.[203]

Each September from 1910 to 1915, a new Jordaan farce was produced

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by the Ensemble Solser en Hesse, with which they scored triumph upon triumph. The efficacious ideas and storylines were devised by Lion Solser, who also did the stage direction of the sketches and often took on the female lead. Whereas Piet Hesse had been born and raised in Amsterdam, Solser acquired the accent and the spirit of the Jordaan by doing extensive research at markets and cafés, where he went in search of typical costumes, expressions, and bits of behavior.

> This is how the Amsterdam *volksstukken* and the characters in them as played by Solser and Hesse became precise and apt imitations of reality, and equivalent to some of Justus van Maurik's stories. In their acting, they have emphasized the sensitive, the human, and the altruistic qualities of ordinary people, and the jollity with which they wrap them up. Lion Solser's creations evinced his sympathy for common people, and the pleasure he took in their conduct. Through his acting, he became one of them while their conduct became art.[204]

Their first sketch in the genre, "Heb je 't kind al gezien?" (Have you seen the baby yet?), was set in the proto-street of the Jordaan district: the Willemsstraat. It pictured the excitement of the people, most notably of Ka the fishmonger, upon learning that the royal parade for the baby Princess Juliana intended to pay a call to their street: "L. Solser is a gem of an Amsterdam fishmonger, with all the humor that used to belong to the genre",[205] Rössing wrote admiringly. In addition to the location, the female type, the idioms, and the jollity, two other elements characteristic of the "genre Solser en Hesse" were introduced: song and dance intermezzos and a heartfelt moment; "mindful of the tears and the laughter, a moving song by a good woman in distress, in the face of which the people from the Jordaan instantly put their hands in their pockets",[206] Rido remembered.

But Lion Solser's best-known "creation" was Mie, another fishmonger, who appeared in the sketch "Weet je 't al van Schellevis-Mie?" (Have you heard the news of Haddock Mie?) from 1914-1915. This sketch was so notable that the columnist of *De Theatergids* declared it the hit of the theater season. His impressionistic description of Solser's role is priceless, its irony notwithstanding:

> Haddock Mie, presented by Lion Solser with all the charm and goodness of heart and looseness of legs that is hers. Watch her hips swaying, Lion Solser! Watch her tango, Lion Solser! Watch her pat-a-cake, Lion Solser, and watch her scrape the scales from her fish, Lion Solser! Watch her in her poshest fashionable dress and her brightest white smock, Lion Solser!

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Fig. I.8: Poster for Lion Solser's most well-known and last role, 1915.

> And then tell me if she isn't an asset to the guild of women fishmongers, Lion Solser! Hear her voice, hear her tongue! [...]
> Well, Lion Solser deserves the honorary membership in the Free Society of Women Fishmongers based on Dutch Reformed principles, "The Obstinate Buoy."[207]

"Schellevisch-Mie" was staged 100 times, even though the performance was repeatedly cancelled due to Lion Solser's worsening neurasthenia. After his death, Anna Hesse-Slauderof took on the title part and even selected the sketch for the celebration of her thirtieth stage-anniversary.[208] The Ensemble Solser en Hesse continued to perform, although they stopped producing new Jordaan sketches. It had become impossible to imagine Dutch popular theater of the 1910s without the genre they had created and epitomized. With their one-act plays and sketches, Solser and Hesse had substantially contributed to the hype that had come to surround comic Jordaan characters by the mid-teens. They likewise had had a pivotal role in the migration and transformation of the genre from the provincial *variété* and urban cabaret to the Amsterdam playhouses specializing in Jordaan plays. Moreover they had

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highlighted a comic *female* character—albeit in drag—, but the character was apparently womanly enough to be played by women later on.

Herman Bouber, himself a semi-professional actor, disliked the sensational melodramas in which his wife Aaf played at the Plantage Schouwburg, because they were set in a milieu and presented in a language alien to the public.[209] According to Rido, Bouber had observed in the performances of the Ensemble Solser en Hesse how much the audience appreciated the use of its familiar tongue and idioms, a connection documented in contemporary reviews.[210] It seems likely that the plays staged by Marius Spree at the Plantage-Schouwburg up until 1912 had been another source of inspiration for Bouber.[211] For, while Solser's main aim had been to make people laugh, Bouber sought a balance between dramatic and comic elements that was much more akin to the one found in Spree's plays. Another similarity between these two was their choice of titles, which consisted of a typical Jordaan nickname. Bouber's first Jordaan comedy, "Mooie Neel: De Trots van de Jordaan" (Pretty Nell: The Pride of the Jordaan), premiered at the Rozen-Theater in August 1916.[212]

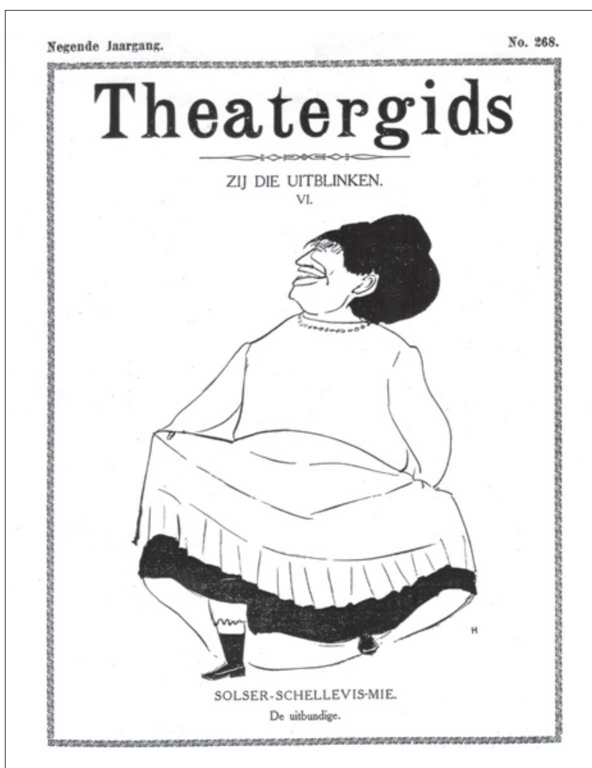


Fig. I.9: Caricature of Lion Solser in the role of Haddock-Mie. Cover page *Theatergids*, 31 January 1915.

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With at least as much success as the Ensemble Solser en Hesse had, Bouber filled the void after Lion Solser's death had interrupted the stream of new Jordaan sketches. Thus in 1918 there followed "Bleeke Bet" and "Linke Louwtje" (Wily Little Louw), and, in 1919, "Oranje Hein", "Manussie van Alles" (Jack-of-all-trades), and "De Jantjes", after which the flow tapered off for awhile.[213] It picked up again, but at a slower pace, with "Blonde Ka" (Blond Ka) in 1923, "De Jantjes II" somewhat later in the decade, and "Zeemansvrouwen" (Seaman's Wives) in 1928.

To create and sustain his successes, Bouber surrounded himself with actors and collaborators who had gained experience with the genre and with the popular stage: first and foremost, Nap de la Mar, who undertook the stage direction of "Bleeke Bet" and "Linke Louwtje". Rido articulated Bouber's enthusiasm with his stage director: "Nap walks the actors through all parts, just from memory, without the text. And the author was amazed watching Nap make much more of the characters than what he had seen in them." [214] As actors, Bouber assured himself of the collaboration of Jan Buderman, Louis van Dommelen, Piet Köhler, and Aaf Bouber, to name only those I have previously mentioned.[215] Crucial to their success was also the long-term collaboration with Louis Davids and Margie Morris, who wrote and composed, respectively, the sing-a-longs that eventually turned into staple offerings. Furthermore, there was Piet Hesse, who, along with his ensemble, took several of the comedies on tour through the provinces. And, last but not least, the pieces were either premiered at the Rozen-Theater and prolonged at the Hollandsche Schouwburg, or the reverse.

Rido called "Bleeke Bet" one of the merriest Jordaan comedies ever written by Bouber and simultaneously identified it as the prototype for Bouber's later plays.[216] In retrospect, however, it is hard to tell what it was precisely that made these plays so merry. Their plots, to be sure, seem more dramatic than farcical. "Bleeke Bet" tells a story about Bet, who manages a green-grocery while longing to own a tavern, and about her attractive daughter Jans, who has given her heart to the sturdy but good-natured Ko. The usurer landlord van Zanten would like Jans to marry his simpleton son, and promises to give Bet her bar if she manages to change her daughter's mind. Bet is also involved in his shady smuggling operation. This is the set-up for a series of machinations and intrigues carried out by a range of local characters, before the happy ending is reached and the conflict between selfishness and young people's right to happiness is overcome. The conflict is loosely connected to class differences but is basically defined as a moral one—there are good people and there are bad people in either class—and the community represented is both split and narrow. The only reference to an outside world is to the sea: Ko signs up as a sailor for a year, is reported to have been killed in a shipwreck, but then

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returns safely; thus, although bad is done yet eventually forgiven within the residents' world, the outside world may portend risk and danger, even though things turn out better than feared.[217]

Since the mirth is not located in the plot nor in the kind of gags that constituted the Ensemble Solser en Hesse's trademark, it must have inhered in the spirit of the play, its use of the local idiom, its incorporation of dance and music numbers, as well as in the characterizations of local types. To capture this spirit, Wolf's wildly enthusiastic account may be of help:

> This is the most genuine and sincere folk humor, the purest kind of Amsterdam popular wit one can think of! This is the Amsterdam folk in its droll routine, for better or worse, true to life's ups and downs![218]

Unfortunately, all silent film versions adapted from the plays are missing, except for some clips from DE JANTJES (1922). The surviving ZEEMANSVROUWEN (1930) was originally exhibited as a silent film, but restored in 2003 by the Nederlands Filmmuseum as a sound film with a reconstructed dialogue and new music.[219] The surviving sound adaptations of DE JANTJES (1934) and, most notably, of BLEEKE BET (1934), in contrast, do not seem to capture the merry spirit of the plays.[220] BLEEKE BET was reported to differ from both the play and its silent adaptation, unfortunately without a further clarification of how.[221] Rido judged it as a poor film and suggested that this was one of the reasons for the bad name the plays had acquired in theater history.[222] One of the problems the film poses for present-day spectators is its unbalanced rhythm, with the actors breaking into song and bringing the action to a halt, whereas it was precisely the hit songs that ought to have been among the film's greatest assets, as they had been among the play's. Another issue is how to get immersed in the humor displayed in the characters. Rather than merry, in my eyes, they seem to be heartless and pathetic—Bet, played by Aaf Bouber, as well as Goocheme Sally (Smart Sally), played by Louis Davids in the silent film and by Sylvain Poons in the sound film—particularly so. The film contains some intentionally comic scenes; for instance, a scene in which an angry Jans throws the presents she was given by her beau out the window, or another in which Bet does the same with the dishes. But these scenes in no way clarify, let alone recreate, the overall high-spirited effect the story and its characters seem to have had on their theater audience at the time. They do prove, however, that the comical is both historical and local in nature, a product of its time and its place.

Nevertheless, various descriptions disclose that one of the main differences between the sketches by Solser en Hesse and the *volksstukken* by Bouber is the construction of the plot. With the former, a simple premise occasions a series of jocose but familiar scenes; a small inheritance, for instance, trig-

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gers a night out. As such, they are farces with an episodic structure. Bouber, by contrast, weaves a fabric of relations around typical characters based on a dramatic conflict, often a love theme, and accordingly employs a more (melo) dramatic structure. In this respect, his plays are closer to Spree's than to Solser's. Another difference is that Bouber's plots do not revolve around one central, dominant female Jordaan character: in "Bleeke Bet" the Bet character is a supporting role. Moreover, this Bet was a far cry from the good-humored, carefree, and candid character created for the stage by Lion Solser. It is my impression, therefore, that Adriënne Solser's Bet persona came much closer to her brother's creations than to Bouber's female Jordaan characters.

After 1915, Jordaan comedy became all the rage, even beyond the works of Bouber, Nap de la Mar, Spree, Rido, and Adriënne Solser. The Jordaan duo "Mie en Ko"[223] continued cross-dressing in the *variété* tradition that had been made popular by the Ensemble Solser en Hesse. In the popular theater context, the Frascati-Schouwburg staged a Jordaan adaptation of a Flemish *volksklucht* (people's farce) in 1917, "Kee van de Lindengracht naar Parijs" (Kee of the Lindengracht goes to Paris), which proved to be, according to Wolf,

> a play so full of life and so full of jokes that, although not always of the most refined sort, they bubble over with humor as in a farce by Bredero or Langendijk. [...] Kee is played in a truly Kee-esque manner.[224]

The female Jordaan character's name, by then, had become a trademark in its own right.

Volksstukken had become generic, as the literary critic Martin Liket proclaimed in 1918; however, he also criticized them for being nothing other than a revival of the archaic melodrama and reproached the authors for the lack of acuteness. None of these "volksdichters" (folk poets), according to Liket, had known how "to arouse the national spirit of our country, [...] to more candidly address our countrymen, to get a little deeper into the heart of the nation, [...] or to flog the languor of our people with the whip of his mighty word."[225] Liket called for a witty and acute style, instead of the slightly moralistic but generally indiscriminate tone characteristic of the genre. This acuteness, moreover, should be widened from a local group of people—namely, the people of the Jordaan—to include the Dutch population as a whole. Liket's ideal seems to be based upon a slippage in the meaning of the prefix *volks-* in the two terms *volksstukken* and *volksdichter*. Seen from the perspective of genre and of the ways in which genres are used by those who create them and by those whom they address, the prefix has divergent meanings. The *volksstukken* drew upon keen observation and addressed the audience in an immediate, collective manner. As such, *volksstukken* belong to the realm of folk culture, in the

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Bakhtinian sense in which a culture derives from and belongs to the people.[226] On the other hand, the term *volksdichter* implies a reflection upon and the condensation of material gained from observation and, by consequence, a different mode of address, which can also be inferred from Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwe's delineation of Speenhoff's craft:

> Speenhoff's verses are the reflection of the Dutch people's "mood," and we admire him and are proud of our national bard who is not merely "entertaining" but can also in his austere clarity strike the most touching notes.[227]

The *volksdichter* reflects and condenses a shared spirit for the people, and, as Liket suggested, holds up a mirror to the population he sings about. As a poet, he belongs to the realm of cabaret and literature, to the arts, which address people not collectively, but as individuals. The prefix, in this case, signifies a mood or spirit prevalent but latent in the people's culture. Thus, Liket's slippage between the two meanings of *volks-* can be read as a sign that a gap was emerging between people's plays and popular art. Unpretentiousness was still an esteemed quality and linked to humor and genuineness, but art was now located elsewhere.

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